THE GIRL FROM U.N.C.L.E.

MAGAZINE

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APRIL DANCER

"An Armful of Dark-Haired Danger"

and

MARK SLATE

"The Agent Whose Business is Death"

in

THE DEADLY DRUG AFFAIR

Together they must track down and destroy a hidden village peopled with deadly robots — before an unspeakable mission is unleashed upon the world!

The New Complete U.N.C.L.E. Novel by

ROBERT HART DAVIS

The Deadly Drug Affair

Number IV of *The Girl From UNCLE*

Robert Hart Davis

Tags:Grizli777

THE DEADLY DRUG AFFAIR

By Robert Hart Davis

Hidden deep in the Ozarks was a village of living dead, as April Dancer and Mark Slate fly to keep a strange tryst with men who smile and obey your every wish–then die!

PROLOGUE

Caleb North was not a patient man, as everyone in Pig Wallow knew only too well.

So that when Sarah, his long-suffering wife, realized that she was a full hour late in getting supper, her face blanched. Caleb was not one to be kept waiting when victuals time came around.

Big Caleb was construction boss at the quarry. He had kept his job with his fists and his bellowing voice for many years-too many, some people said.

Sarah North was too good for him. Everyone in town knew that. She was patient and uncomplaining, even when her migraine was half killing her. An aspirin and a meek smile and she'd drag herself to her feet and get the day's work done somehow.

"Not that that big brute would appreciate it none," Ma Rooney, who ran the boarding house, would say indignantly. "Just let him give me any of his big talk. I'd fix him. Yes, sir."

No one quite knew how Ma proposed to do it, since no one else in town had been able to. But that was another matter.

On this night, Sarah was particularly tired. Her headache had been bad all morning and two aspirins had made her over-sleep, which was why the roast had not been put on early enough.

She sighed.

Caleb wouldn't like that. Not one bit.

And suddenly, out of her misery and worry, came a strange perverse stiffening of her moral fiber, so that when she heard his footsteps coming down the walk she was ready for him, her chin thrust out defiantly, for once in her life.

The very first thing he said, she told herself fiercely, she'd just fly at him.

Such was her inner turmoil, it so happened, that she beat him to the first word.

The minute the door opened she snapped, "Supper's late, Caleb. I couldn't help it, I tell you. Don't you say one single bad word. Do you hear me?"

He looked down at her. "Yes, Sarah," he said.

And lumbered back out to the kitchen to wash up.

If Sarah North had not been so excited, she would have noticed that for perhaps the first time in his adult life, big Caleb North had spoken in a low voice instead of a bellow.

But right now another terrible thing had happened, driving all else from her mind.

The confounded roast, which had been put in the oven too late, was now overdone. She'd turned the flame too high.

And Caleb had to have his meat real raw!

She came into the dining room. Caleb was sitting in his big chair, staring out across the swampland.

She said tartly, "The meat's burned, Caleb. Now you just put your hand over your mouth so the bad words don't come out. I've all I can bear, Caleb. Not one single word from you! You hear?"

That was at 6:35.

At 6:50 Sarah North, looking as though she had seen a ghost, came waveringly up the walk with Ma Rooney holding her arm, supporting her.

They pushed open the door. Sarah said dully, "I told him to put his hand over his mouth. I just couldn't stand a single word more of his nasty tongue." She swayed. "And now–"

Caleb North was sitting in his big chair, staring out into the night. His hand was over his mouth, so the bad words couldn't come out. Just as Sarah had ordered.

In truth, Caleb North wouldn't have been able to curse and carry on, even if he had wanted to.

Caleb North, in fact, was quite dead.

ONE
TRYST WITH DANGER

Del Floria's Tailor Shop is on a quiet New York street in the shadow of the United Nations Building. The pleasant looking woman seated at a pants presser near the rear of the shop looked up in mild surprise at the breathless entry of a slim, dark-haired girl.

After a quick glance around to make sure the shop was empty, the girl scurried to the rear of the shop, dropping a breathless, "Hi," to the woman before the pressing machine as she passed. She entered a dressing cubicle at the very rear of the shop. After closing the door behind her, she waited, facing the rear wall of the cubicle.

In the outer room the pleasant looking woman touched a button on her machine which had nothing to do with its pants-pressing function.

A panel at the rear of the dressing cubicle slid aside and the girl stepped into an office lobby.

A male clerk behind a counter said, "They're waiting for you in Mr. Waverly's office, Miss Dancer.

Mr. Slate arrived fifteen minutes ago."

"Oh, my!" April Dancer said, she started to hurry by the counter into the corridor beyond, suddenly put on the brakes and turned back

when the clerk said, “Whoa!”

A trifle sheepishly she held out her hand for the radioactive LD. triangle the clerk was extending to her.

“You wouldn’t want to set off alarms all over the place, would you?” he admonished.

“Sorry,” she murmured, pinning the badge to her bosom.

Pausing breathlessly before a door at the end of the hall, she knocked. A reserved, quiet voice told her to come in.

Alexander Waverly, director of the United Network Command of Law Enforcement’s New York office, sat behind a huge oval desk containing several telephones and a panel with numerous switches. He was a tweedy, soft-spoken man past middle-age who gave the impression he would remain calm and unruffled in the midst of a hurricane.

Two other people were in the office with him.

Mark Slate, seated in one of two chairs before the desk, was a lean, muscular man in his early thirties with the eyes of a poet and the build of an athlete. As a matter of fact he was a bit of both. He could strum a guitar like a minstrel and was an excellent rock-and-roll singer. He was also an R.A.F. veteran and former member of the British Olympic ski team.

Slate, a transfer from U.N.C.L.E.‘S London headquarters, wore a Carnaby Street suit, a rather vivid tie and a checked waistcoat. He resembled a young London man-about-town more than he did a secret agent.

The other person, standing alongside the desk with some papers in his hand, was Randy Kovac, a tall, coltish teenager. Randy, still in high school, was an experiment. U.N.C.L.E.‘S first and only part-time on-the-job trainee, he was supposed to work in the Communications Section only four hours a week. The training so fascinated him, though, he could be found at headquarters, as often as not in areas which had nothing to do with communications, practically every minute he could spare from school or study.

Mr. Waverly said in his usual formal manner, “You are late, Miss Dancer.”

There was no accusation in his tone. It was merely a statement of fact.

“Sorry, sir,” she said. “I’ve no excuse. There is a sale at Macy’s, and I simply got carried away. I didn’t realize what time it was.”

“Hmmph,” Waverly said with a frown.

Mark Slate, who had risen from his chair, gave April a cheery smile, then said to Waverly, “That’s an adequate excuse, sir. You know April can’t resist a bargain.”

Waverly’s frown deepened; then he dismissed the matter with a

gesture. “Sit down, Miss Dancer.”

April sat and threw a smile at young Randy. The boy, who had a teenage crush on the girl agent, blushed slightly as he smiled back. Slate reseated himself next to April.

Alexander Waverly made a steeple of his fingers, leaned back in his chair and said, “We’ll get right down to business. Mr. Kovac, please read the dossiers.”

Randy looked down at his papers, cleared his throat and read:

“Boris Rank, age forty, unmarried. Born Kaunas, Lithuania. Immigrated to the United States at age eighteen and worked his way through the Columbia University School of business. Still has a slight, nearly unnoticeable Lithuanian accent. Worked as a junior executive for a New York baking company for a few years after college, then moved to St. Louis and started his own company. Is now president of the Rank Baking Company, the third largest manufacturer of baked goods in the Midwest. Hobbies: chess and girls.”

“Girls?” April said.

“Mr. Rank fancies himself as a ladies’ man,” Waverly said. “He will be your target, Miss Dancer. Show her Mr. Rank’s photo, please, Mr. Kovac.”

Randy handed April a glossy eight-by-ten print of a dark-haired, exceedingly handsome man with regular features and a cleft chin. He bore a vague resemblance to Cary Grant.

“My,” April said admiringly. “A pleasant assignment for a change.”

She passed the photograph to Mark Slate, who studied it briefly and handed it back to Randy.

Waverly said, “You play chess, Miss Dancer?”

“Oh, yes. Rather well.”

Randy shuffled his papers and read; “Dorcus Elias, age twenty-nine, unmarried. Miss Elias was born in Greece and immigrated here with her parents when she was four. She has a master of science in biochemistry from Washington University and presently is the head of the Rank Baking Company’s research division. Hobbies: skiing and men.”

“Men?” Mark Slate said. Waverly made a signal to Randy and the latter handed Slate another eight-by-ten glossy print.

Waverly said, “As you can see by her photograph, she is quite a beautiful woman. I am sure you will have no trouble eliciting her interest, Mr. Slate.”

“Thanks for your confidence, sir,” Slate said. “It sounds like a lovely assignment.”

He studied the photograph and April craned to see it too. It was of a pale, lovely, dark-haired woman with beautifully chiseled features. He handed the picture back to Randy without comment.

"What's U.N.C.L.E.'s interest in these people?" April asked.

Waverly said, "We learned some time ago that Boris Rank has been in periodic contact with a certain THRUSH agent named Anton Radak. We also learned that Radak was introduced to him by his employee, Miss Elias. However, surveillance has never disclosed that either has ever, so far, engaged in any THRUSH activity. We were prepared to write it off as merely a coincidental social relationship when an odd development came to our attention. "

"What was that?" April asked. "Both Mr. Rank and Miss Elias have made reservations to attend the forthcoming national convention of psychiatrists at Axton, New York in the Catskill Mountains."

April and Slate both looked bewildered. April said, "Why would a biochemist and the president of a baking company want to attend a psychiatrist's convention?"

"Exactly what we wondered. It is most peculiar, in that neither has any background in the field of psychiatry, nor has ever before exhibited any interest in the subject, insofar as we can determine. It will be the jobs of you and Mr. Slate to discover just what they are up to."

"What's our cover?" Slate asked.

"You are Dr. Mark Slate, clinical psychoanalyst from Miami, Florida. Arrangements have been made for you to be the official delegate from Miami. You, Miss Dancer, hold a bachelor of science degree in biochemistry and are a lab technician for the Grunewald Pet Food Company of New York. Your B.S. is from Columbia. Incidentally, this will give you something in common with Mr. Rank."

"What's my excuse for being at the convention?" April asked.

"Ostensibly you will not be attending the convention," Waverly informed her. "You are merely vacationing at the same hotel. Axton is a summer resort."

April nodded. "When does this convention start?"

"Friday morning, but I wish you and Mr. Slate to check into the Hotel Axton by late Thursday afternoon, as delegates will start arriving by then. That gives you three days to brush up on biochemistry sufficiently to avoid being exposed as a fraud. And you, Mr. Slate, have the same length of time to learn the peculiar cant of psychiatry."

"Oh, great!" Slate said. "It only takes about twelve years of study to become a psychiatrist. I'm supposed to master it in three days."

"One hour from now you will begin a cram course conducted by our able psychiatric consultant, Dr. Marvin Brow," Waverly said patiently. "Your instruction will last twelve hours a day for the next three days. You will be taking a similar cram course in biochemistry,

Miss Dancer."

Slate said dubiously, "It still seems rather short."

"You won't be required to treat any patients," Waverly told him. "You merely have to learn enough jargon to discuss with reasonable intelligence such things as ids, trauma and so forth."

"Oh, I suppose I can master that," Slate said. He took April's hand and gazed at her in a professional manner. "Just relax, young lady," he said in a soothing tone. "You don't have to be afraid of me, because I'm only here to help you. Now just when did you first begin to hate your father?"

April Dancer jerked her hand free. "If you were my psychiatrist I'd prefer to stay mad," she said with an attempt at primness which failed because she burst into laughter.

"Hurrumph," Mr. Waverly said.

"Let us get back to the business at hand."

TWO

ENEMY TERRITORY

Attached to the central pillar in the lobby of the Hotel Axton was a bulletin board of white letters on a black background. It read: NATIONAL CONVENTION OF PSYCHIATRISTS. REGISTRATION ROOM 102. Below this was a list of meetings and activities.

A tall, handsome, dark-haired man with muscular shoulders and a narrow Waist stood reading the sign. A touch of gray at the temples gave him a distinguished look, his face was the one April Dancer had seen in the photograph at U.N.C.L.E. headquarters, but now that he wasn't posing for a photograph, there was a touch of ruthlessness in it which hadn't shown in the picture.

A convention badge on his coat lapel read: BORIS RANK. ST. LOUIS.

The man grew conscious of someone standing alongside of him and glanced sidewise to see a slim, lovely girl with dark hair falling to her shoulders. She was interestedly studying the bulletin board. He noted that she wore no convention badge.

"Workshop on psychedelic drugs," the girl read aloud. She glanced at the man next to her, noted his badge and said, "Oh, you're one of the doctors. Whatever are psychedelic drugs?"

"L.S.D., marijuana, that sort of thing," he said. "I am not a doctor, however." He had a slight, barely noticeable foreign accent which was rather pleasing.

She looked at his badge, then up into his face. "I see it doesn't say *doctor*. Whyever are you at the convention, then?"

He smiled. "I have an interest in some of the things which will be discussed. Actually I'm a baker."

"A baker?" the girl said in surprise.

"I don't actually bake, Miss. I am president of the Rank Baking Company of St. Louis."

"How coincidental," the girl said. "I work for a company that makes dog and cat food."

Boris Rank blinked, failing to see the connection, then smiled with amusement.

"That does give us something in common," he said with a touch of dryness. "Miss–" He let it trail off into a question.

"Dancer," she said. "April Dancer. I can see your name. Boris

Rank." She pronounced the name as though savoring it and her expression suggested she liked its taste.

Boris Rank expanded visibly. "Since you are not wearing a badge, I take it you are not here for the convention."

"Oh, goodness no. I'm just on vacation." She added ruefully, "Not a very successful one so far, and it's almost over."

"Oh?" he said with raised eyebrows. "I thought the Catskills was supposed to be ideal vacation country."

"Oh, it is beautiful. But you know why single girls pick summer resorts for their vacations." She emitted a tinkling little laugh and answered her own question. "In the hope of meeting eligible men. So far all I've met are married men looking for a little side romance."

His expression became definitely interested. "Perhaps I could help make the rest of your vacation more successful."

April regarded him dubiously. "Isn't there a Mrs. Rank back in St. Louis?"

He shook his head. "There is an elderly Mrs. Rank in Lithuania, but she happens to be my mother. I am quite unattached."

"Well," April Dancer said with another tinkling little laugh. "Things are finally looking up."

In the bar just off the hotel lobby, Mark Slate took a stool next to a dark-haired, beautiful woman in her late twenties. The woman's pale complexion was of the texture and color of fine white porcelain and her features were as classically lovely as a cut cameo, but her beauty was slightly marred by an expression of brooding sullenness Slate had seen of her in Waverly's office.

She had a figure as lovely as her face, Slate noted with approval. Pinned to her breast was a badge lettered: DORCUS ELIAS. ST. LOUIS.

Slate ordered a drink, paid for it and which she hadn't worn in the picture took a sip, then glanced at the woman's convention badge. "Is that Dr. Dorcus Elias?" he asked.

She glanced at him, at first without interest, then her somewhat sullen expression softened when she looked into his smiling eyes. Her gaze dropped to his convention badge, which read: DR. MARK SLATE. MIAMI.

She said politely, "No, I'm not a doctor, Dr. Slate. I happen to be a biochemist for a baking company."

He cocked a quizzical eyebrow at her. "What on earth are you doing at a convention of psychiatrists?"

"I'm interested in certain psychiatric drugs. I only plan to attend a couple of meetings."

Slate grinned. "Are you people putting psychiatric drugs into cookies and cakes now in order to make your products habit forming?"

She let her lip corners lift in the barest suggestion of an answering smile. “That’s an idea which might interest my boss. But actually my interest has nothing to do with my present job. I’m doing research for an eventual doctor of science degree. I only have a master’s now.”

“Hmm,” Slate said. “Both brains and beauty. I suppose it’s too much to hope for that it’s Miss Elias instead of Mrs.”

She was definitely smiling now. “It’s Miss, though I prefer just Dorcus. Is there a Mrs. Slate?”

Slate shook his head. “Not even a potential Mrs. Slate. And I thought this convention would be dull. Could we pursue the subject of our mutual single blessedness over dinner? Incidentally, I prefer being called Mark to being called Doctor.”

After a momentary hesitation, she said, “I would like to accept, Mark, but I’m not sure I’ll be free. I’m here with my boss, and he may have planned to take me to dinner.”

“Oh,” Slate said in a disappointed tone.

“He probably wouldn’t mind,” she said quickly. “We’re not–I mean there is nothing between us except an employer-employee relationship. Why don’t we look for him and find out if he has any plans?”

“All right,” Slate agreed. “Where do we look?”

“We can start with the lobby. If he isn’t there, I’ll ring his room.”

They finished their drinks and went into the lobby together.

Quite a number of the people in the lobby were wearing convention badges. Slate and Dorcus paused just outside the barroom door and Dorcus glanced around.

“There he is, over by the bulletin board,” she said. “Talking to that young girl.”

They made their way over to where Boris Rank conversed with April Dancer. Rank glanced up as they arrived and frowned slightly. He said in a polite and not overly-enthusiastic tone, “Hello, Dorcus. This is Miss April Dancer. Miss Dorcus Elias, April.”

April murmured that she was glad to meet Dorcus. The latter looked April up and down with the practiced eye of a highly competitive female before saying politely, “How do you do?”

She introduced Slate as Dr. Slate. “Mark, not Doctor, Dorcus,” Slate said, giving April a polite smile and shaking hands with Rank.

April, with no sign of recognition in her eyes, said, “Glad to know you, doctor–I mean Mark.”

“Mark had asked me to dine with him,” Dorcus said to her employer. “Did you have any other plans?”

Boris Rank looked delighted by the news. He said enthusiastically, “As a matter of fact I was planning to ask Miss Dancer to dine with me. We could make it a foursome, if she’s agreeable.”

He gave April an inquiring look and she said, “I would love it, providing you will stop being so formal. I’m April, not Miss Dancer.”

“Of course,” Rank said. “And I’m Boris.”

The four dined together in the hotel dining room. After dinner they moved to the ballroom and spent the evening dancing. There was the usual trading of life histories, and when Rank discovered April’s interest in his hobby, chess, he was delighted. When she disclosed the spurious information that she had attended Columbia University, she established the further bond with him of being a fellow alumnus of the same school.

She had a bad moment, though, when he learned her degree was in biochemistry. An expression not quite of suspicion, but at least or wary puzzlement swiftly crossed his face.

“If you are a biochemist, how come you didn’t know what psychedelic drugs are?” he asked, frowning.

After a momentary feeling of chagrin at her blunder, April recovered beautifully. With a mischievous grin, she said, “I did know. For your information, some of the synonyms are psychotomimetic, psychelytic, and hallucinogens. It’s considered fair for a girl to pretend ignorance when she wants to meet a man.”

Boris Rank was so flattered by her confession that all suspicion evaporated.

Dorcus showed some momentary interest in April when she overheard her say she was a biochemist. They had a few minutes of shop talk, which April managed glibly enough thanks to her day crash course in biochemistry. Fortunately, Dorcus’s interest in the girl agent was short-lived, because she was directing most of her attention to Mark Slate.

She was delighted to discover he was a ski enthusiast and they had a spirited discussion of the best ski runs in the United States and Canada. In between he taught her to frug and April taught the dance to Rank.

Eventually, with pretended mere politeness, Slate asked April to dance. Boris Rank decided it would be polite to dance at least once with his employee too, so they paired off with each others’ dates.

As they moved across the floor together, Slate said, “You’re in. You have him eating out of your hand.”

She said, “Don’t you let that woman get you alone. She looks as though she would like to eat you up.”

“Do I detect a note of jealousy’?” he asked, looking down into her face. “I thought you looked up to me as a big brother.”

“Not up,” she said, squinting her nose at him. “Down. Just be careful. She’s been engaged seven times, remember.”

“Don’t worry,” he assured her. “I’m a chronic bachelor.”

April was wondering how to end the evening before dawn when, at midnight, Slate announced that he had to make a nine o'clock seminar and suggested they call it a night.

Rank and Dorcus both seemed disappointed, but neither made any objection. Rank accompanied April to her room on the fifth floor, Slate and Dorcus got off at the third, as Dorcus and Rank had adjoining rooms on that floor.

When they reached her room, April put her back to the door without opening it, smiled at Rank and said, "I had a lovely evening, Boris. Thank you so much."

The man looked disappointed that he wasn't going to be invited in, but he didn't push it. He took both April's hands gently and said, "How about breakfast together Miss Dancer?"

"All right," she agreed. "What time?"

"The convention meetings start at nine. Is eight too early?"

"Just fine. Suppose I meet you in the coffee shop?"

"Good. I'll see you then."

He tipped up her chin and kissed her lightly on the lips. Despite herself, April Dancer felt a tingle run along her spine.

He *was* a real handsome man.

She opened the door and slipped inside.

THREE

LAIR OF THE TIGRESS

On the third floor, Dorcus Elias didn't perform as demurely as April. After keying open her door, she smiled over her shoulder at Slate and went on into the room, leaving the door open behind her. Slate followed her in, but left the door open.

She gave him a look of mild surprise, then went over and pushed it shut herself.

"Would you like a nightcap?" she asked.

"I shouldn't," he said. "I want to be fresh for my seminar in the morning."

"Which one are you attending?"

"Which one are you?" he countered.

"The one on new psychiatric drugs still in the experimental stage. Actually there are two I would like to attend, but they're both scheduled for nine. I've asked Boris to attend the one on dosages of psychiatric drugs, patients' reactions and dangerous side-effects. He's going to take notes for me."

"I'm attending the same session you are," Slate said with a smile. "Why don't we have breakfast and then attend the meeting together?"

"All right. I'll meet you in the coffee shop at eight." Her voice became wheedling. "You'll have just one little nightcap, won't you?"

He decided not to risk offending her by refusing.

"All right," he gave in. "But I plan to be in bed in fifteen minutes."

Her slight smile suggested that she planned to change his mind on that score. She indicated a bottle of bourbon and a bottle of scotch on the dresser.

"You fix the drinks. Soda's in the refrigerator and so are ice cubes. I'll freshen up and be right back." She disappeared into the bathroom.

Slate took a quick glance around. His gaze touched an air-conditioning vent in the wall. He crossed to it and removed small item somewhat resembling a shirt stud from his pocket. What would have been the stone in a stud was a clear glass lens, however.

He set the visual bug between two of the vent's louvers, stepped back and examined it critically. Then, satisfied that it was not likely to be noticed, he went over to the small refrigerator with which every room at the Axton was equipped and took out an ice tray. He had two drinks made when Dorcus emerged from the bathroom, looking very pretty.

She accepted her drink from Slate's hand, sat on the bed with her feet curled under her and patted the place alongside of her.

"If I sat down, I'm afraid I'd go to sleep," he said with a disarming smile. "I'm really quite beat."

A small frown marred the beauty of her face. Then she gave a resigned shrug and took a sip of her drink.

Slate drank his rather quickly, standing up. He had carefully measured only a half-ounce of scotch into his own glass and had added a liberal amount of soda. Dorcus had consumed only a third of her drink when Slate set his empty glass on the dresser.

"I really have to run," he said.

"I tell my patients adequate sleep is essential, and I have to practice what I preach. It's been a lot of fun. See you in the morning."

The frown on Dorcus' face started to deepen; then she smoothed it away and rose to her feet. Setting her glass on the dressing table, she accompanied him to the door.

"Thanks for a nice evening," she said softly, then put her arms around his neck and raised her lips.

It was a warm kiss.

"Whew!" he said. "Maybe we can resume this tomorrow, but if I don't leave right now, I may not at all."

"Nobody told you you had to," she said huskily.

He gave her a smile, patted her cheek and said, "Thanks, but not now. Good night."

Slate pulled open the door quickly and went out, catching a last glimpse of her disappointed face just before he pulled the door shut behind him.

Too bad she was a suspected THRUSH agent, he thought ruefully as he made for the elevator. She was a lovely woman, but he had a certain revulsion to becoming romantically involved with women who owed allegiance to U.N.C.L.E.'s archenemy.

Slate's room was on the fourth floor, but he continued on up to fifth. April, in a terrycloth robe over her nightgown, opened the door to his code knock. Slate slipped quickly inside and closed the door.

"How did you break away so soon?" April asked. "I was sure the Elias woman had romantic designs on you,"

"You misjudge the poor girl," he told her. "She's really quite virtuous. I managed to plant a visual bug in her room."

"Oh?" April said.

She went over to her purse on the dressing table, took a compact from it, opened it and looked into the mirror as she adjusted a small dial on its side. The mirror became hazy, then cleared and Dorcus' image appeared on the tiny screen. The woman was seated at her

dressing table, just finishing her drink.

"A secret drinker?" April said. Slate, standing next to her and also watching the tiny screen, said, "I mixed us each a nightcap. She hadn't finished hers when I left."

"Was she wearing that outfit in front of you?" April demanded.

Slate grinned at her. "You're in a similar one."

"This is a robe, not a negligee," April informed him. "It's not nearly as sexy. That woman is after you, Mark."

"Old Boris is after you. It's what we were supposed to accomplish, remember?"

Dorcus had finished her drink. She rose, kicked off her slippers, slipped out of her negligee and carried it into the bathroom. They could see her reach around the edge of the open door to hang it on the hook behind the door. Then she reached down to grip the hem of her nightgown and started to pull it over her head.

The gown had risen to above her knees when April clicked off the image and the screen became a mirror again. "That's enough for you, Mr. Slate," she said, and grinned.

April replaced the compact in her purse and lifted a small transistor radio from the dressing table. She extended an antenna and said, "Section two, please. April Dancer calling."

After a moment a male voice came from the radio's speaker. "Yes, Miss Dancer. Conrad speaking."

"I don't suppose Mr. Waverly is around at this time of night, is he?" April said.

"No, but I can relay to his home."

"Please do," April said.

After a few moments wait, Alexander Waverly's formal voice said, "Yes, Miss Dancer?"

"We've both made contact, sir. We spent the evening with Boris Rank and the Elias woman. I have a breakfast date with Boris."

"I have one with Dorcus too," Slate put in.

April glanced at him and made a face.

Waverly's voice said, "I see you are there too, Mr. Slate. Have you learned why they're attending the convention?"

April said, "They're here to attend the sessions on psychiatric drugs. We don't know why."

"Hmm. Psychiatric drugs, eh? An odd interest for the president of a baking company."

Slate said, "Dorcus claims her interest has nothing to do with her job. She says she's doing research for her doctorate thesis."

"That hardly explains Mr. Rank's interest," Waverly said, "Perhaps you can learn more tomorrow."

"I'm attending one of the sessions with Dorcus, sir," Slate said. "If I

can understand it, I'll report what it was about tomorrow."

"Very well," Waverly said. "I'll expect to hear from you then. Good night."

"Good night, sir," April said, and broke the connection.

Slate said, "Guess I'll turn in," and went over to the door. "Good night, April."

"Wait a minute," April said,

"What time are you meeting the Elias woman?"

"Eightish."

"That's when I'm supposed to meet Boris. We may as well all eat together. But don't expect me until a few minutes after eight"

"Why?" Slate asked.

"I plan to visit Boris' room for a few minutes after he has left," April explained.

"Oh," Slate said with understanding.

He gave her a final grin and went out.

The next morning April was up at a quarter after seven. She had showered and dressed by a quarter of eight. So as not to accidentally encounter Boris Rank or Dorcus Elias on the elevator, she took the stairs to the third floor.

At the end of the corridor where Rank's and Dorcus' rooms were, April Dancer took up a stance around the corner.

At five minutes to eight she saw Dorcus leave her room and head toward the elevator. A moment later Boris Rank's door opened and he stepped out. Spotting Dorcus, he called to her.

April drew back her head when the woman began to turn her way. She waited until she heard the elevator door open and close again. Seeing the corridor now deserted, April clicked down it to Rank's room.

Her right hand raised to her hair and came away with an unusual hairpin. It was of spring steel. One prong was honed to a razor-sharp cutting edge; the other was a lock pick.

A moment later she was in the room and had closed the door behind her.

A quick search of Boris Rank's suitcase and dresser drawers turned up no documents of any sort. She looked for a place to plant a visual bug and settled on the same place Slate had picked in Dorcus' room. She plucked a small metal elephant with jeweled eyes from her charm bracelet and set it between two of the louvers of the air-conditioning vent.

She went out, set the spring lock and closed the door behind her. Minutes later she entered the hotel coffee shop to find Slate, Rank and Dorcus seated at a table together.

The two men rose as she approached. Rank said, "Mark and Dorcus

are breakfasting together too, so I thought we would join them. Do you mind?"

"Of course not," April said "Good morning, Doctor–I mean Mark. Good morning, Dorcus."

Slate bowed formally and wished her good morning. Dorcus murmured something which April presumed was a greeting and immediately returned her attention to Slate. The woman was one of those real predatory females, April decided.

During breakfast Dorcus asked Rank suddenly, "Did you remember to arm yourself with a notebook?"

"Yes," he said.

"Please take as complete notes as you can," she said. "I wish I could make both sessions."

"I'll take complete notes," Rank assured her. "Don't worry about it." He turned to April. "I have to attend this meeting at nine, but it will be over by noon or earlier. May I take you to lunch?"

"All right," April said. "I haven't anything to do between now and noon, though. Could I attend this meeting with you?"

Rank looked pleased by the suggestion. "If you think it won't bore you. It's supposed to be open to convention delegates only, but I'm sure no one will object."

Dorcus said, "Your meeting is in the main ballroom on the, main floor, Boris. Ours is on sixth. It won't be over much before noon. Why don't we all meet in the dining room for lunch?"

FOUR
ASSIGNMENT-HELL

April Dancer understood very little of what went on during the nearly three-hour session in the ballroom. A psychiatrist from Houston named Dr. Felix Bromberger read a long, highly technical paper on the uses of various drugs in the treatment of mentally disturbed patients. The paper was largely devoted to patients' reactions and to dangerous side-effects.

One of the drugs mentioned was a new one, still in the experimental stage, used in the treatment of schizophrenics. It was called Tehedrin 055, and Dr. Bromberger said that one of its unique properties was that dosage didn't seem to be an important factor.

He explained that so far in all clinical tests, only a specific amount of the drug seemed to be absorbed into the systems of patients, regardless of the amount taken, the remainder simply passing through the system and being eliminated by normal means. What caused it to have this unusual property had not yet been determined, but

experiments were continuing.

Boris Rank took copious notes on both the paper and the discussion which followed, but April suspected he had no more understanding of the subject than she did.

The meeting broke up shortly before noon. When Rank and April entered the dining room for lunch, they found Slate and Dorcus already there.

After all four had ordered and the waitress had moved away, Rank said to Dorcus, “How did it go?”

The woman shrugged. “Nothing useful to me in my meeting. How was your session?”

Boris Rank produced the small notebook in which he had jotted notes and passed it across to her.

“It’s all in there,” he said. She riffled through it stopped at a page and her eyes narrowed. “They discussed Tehedrin zero fifty-five,” she said sharply.

“Yes. I made detailed notes on it.”

“That’s a brand new drug, still used only on a clinical basis,” Dorcus said indignantly.“My session was supposed to be on new drugs and they never even mentioned it. I wish I had attended that meeting instead.”

She turned to Mark “You’re probably familiar Tehedrin zero fifty-five, aren’t you, Mark?”

To April it was obvious Slate was out of his depth, neither of the others knew it. He managed to say easily, “I’ve seen some of the clinical reports. I haven’t given them attention because I’m rather opposed to chemical treatment of disturbed patients. I prefer the psychoanalytic approach. I’m strictly a couch man.”

Dorcus put the notebook in her purse.

“I’ll look it over after lunch,” she told Rank.

Boris Rank changed the subject by saying to April, “The convention banquet is tonight. Again it is supposed to be only for delegates, but I am sure I could arrange it if you would like to attend.”

“I would love it,” April said.

Slate looked at Dorcus and said, “And, of course we’re going together, aren’t we?”

“Of course,” she said. “It will be our last night.”

Slate raised his eyebrows. “The convention isn’t over until Sunday night.”

“I know but Boris and I have to get back to St. Louis. There aren’t any more sessions on psychiatric drugs, and we both have work to do at the plant.”

Slate said to Rank, “I know Dorcus is doing research on her doctorate, Boris, but what’s your interest in this subject?”

Rank blinked, then forced a smile and said, “I’m just assisting Dorcus, really. I had to be in Axton on some other business, so I arranged to make my trip coincide with hers!”

This was such a clumsy excuse that Dorcus frowned at him. Even Rank seemed to know he had blundered, because he flushed. Mark Slate saved an awkward moment by pretending to let Rank’s answer in one ear and out the other.

He turned to Dorcus almost before Rank had finished speaking and said, “Be sure to wear your dancing shoes tonight. There’s going to be a sensational band after the banquet.”

After lunch, in keeping with his pose as a clinical psychoanalysist, Slate announced that he had another meeting to attend. Dorcus said that she wanted to retire to her room to study the notes Rank had made.

Seeing a chance to let Dorcus and her employer get together, and perhaps eavesdrop on their talk, April said, “We all got up awfully early. I think I’ll take a nap so that I’ll be fresh tonight.”

“Good idea,” Rank said. “I think I will do the same.”

The moment she reached her room, April took out her compact, opened it and made an adjustment. Dorcus’ image appeared on the tiny screen. The woman sat with pillows propped behind her back on the bed, her shoes off and the notebook Boris Rank had given her open in her lap.

After watching her for a moment, April made an adjustment to the tiny dial on the side of the com pact and Boris Rank’s room jumped into view. The room was empty.

At a knock on the door April closed the compact, put it back in her purse and went to the door. It was Mark Slate.

“I thought you had another meeting, Doctor,” she said as she let him in and closed the door behind him.

“I decided to psychoanalyze you instead,” he said lightly. “Just lie down and make your mind a blank.”

Making a face at him, she took out her compact again and adjusted it for a view of Dorcus’ room. The woman was still studying the notebook.

Slate, standing alongside of April, said, “Good looking witch, isn’t she?”

“If you like them a little heavy,” April said primly.

Slate looked at her in amazement. While Dorcus was somewhat more substantially proportioned than April, there wasn’t an excess pound on her and her waist was nearly as trim as April’s.

Seeing his expression, April laughed. “I’m a cat,” she confessed cheerfully.

She switched the screen for a view of Boris Rank’s room. Rank

entered just as she switched over. They watched him hang his suit coat in the closet, take off his tie and light a cigarette. April switched back to Dorcus' room again.

The woman was no longer on the bed. She had closed the notebook and was in the act of putting on her shoes. She picked up the notebook and left the room.

April switched back to Rank's room and laid the compact on her dressing table.

"She must be going to visit Boris," she said. "Time for audio too."

She extended the antenna of her transistor radio, switched it on and made an adjustment

The sound of a knock came from the radio speaker. On the small screen of the compact they saw Boris Rank go over to the door and open it. Dorcus swept in imperiously and turned to face him.

As Rank closed the door, Dorcus said, "You idiot! Your notes are all but incomprehensible. You can't even spell!"

Instead of resenting such a tone from an employee, Boris Rank cringed.

"That psychiatric jargon is unfamiliar to me, Dorcus," he said apologetically. "I had to spell phonetically when they used some word I didn't know."

Dorcus began pacing up and down, tapping the notebook with her knuckles.

"A clue to our problem is right in here," she said savagely. "And you muffed it by taking incomplete notes. Can you remember anything else at all that was said about this Tehedrin zero fifty-five?"

"I wrote everything down," he insisted. "Everything said about the drug is in those notes. Why is this Tehedrin zero fifty-five so important anyway? It is merely a tranquilizer, from what I gathered. It bears no resemblance whatever to the drug we're concerned with."

"You fool!" Dorcus said. "It was right there before you, and you lacked the brains to see it. I'm not concerned with the use of Tehedrin zero fifty-five. It's that one unique property it has. If we can find out why the body refuses to absorb more than a certain amount Tehedrin zero fifty-five, no matter how much is administered, perhaps we can build the same property into our drug."

An enlightened expression grew on Rank's face.

"Of course," he said. "That would solve our problem, wouldn't it?"

"You see things when they are put in words of one syllable, don't you?" she said with irony. "Of course it would solve our problem. In its present form our drug is useless. What good will it do THRUSH to have an obedient population if most of the population is dead? And so far the experiment at Pig Wallow indicates that is going to be the final result."

April said to Slate, “Pig Wallow? Where’s that?”

Slate shook his head indication that he didn’t know either, and held up a hand for silence.

Boris Rank was saying, “Why don’t we approach the problem devising some different way to distribute the drug, so that dosage can be controlled?”

“A brilliant thought,” Dorcus said scornfully. “What method do you suggest?”

“Well–” Rank let it trail off.

“Exactly,” Dorcus said. “There *is* no way to control dosage when distribution is on a mass basis. Intake has to vary tremendously from individual to individual. Our only hope is to build the same property into our drug that Tehedrin zero fifty-five possesses.”

“Would it help to get hold of a sample of Tehedrin zero fifty-five?” Rank ventured.

Dorcus examined him for a moment, then said grudgingly, “That’s the first intelligent observation you’ve made. Who delivered this paper?”

“A Dr. Felix Bromberger. He has a clinic in Houston.”

“Go look him up,” she said. “Find out from him where the drug is available. If it isn’t available anywhere, find out how much he has stocked, and if it’s all in his Houston clinic. As a last resort we can break in and steal a sufficient supply for analysis and experiment.”

“All right,” Rank agreed. “I’ll run down to registration right now and find out where he is.”

”“Try to be a little subtle,” she said scathingly. “It isn’t necessary to let him know you’re pumping him.”

Boris Rank gave her a wounded look. Dorcus swept from the room like a queen leaving the presence of a peasant.

April closed the compact and put it away, picked up the radio and made an adjustment.

“Section two,” she said. “April Dancer calling.”

After a moment Alexander Waverly’s voice said, “Yes, Miss Dancer?”

“We’ve learned why Boris Rank and the Elias woman attended the convention, sir. They were interested in learning about a new experimental psychiatric drug called Tehedrin zero fifty-five. It seems the drug has an unusual property they hope to build into another drug they are experimenting with.”

April Dancer reported in detail the conversation she and Slate had just overheard.

When she finished, Waverly said, “You have no idea what this drug of THRUSH’S is?”

“No, sir. They didn’t mention it by name.”

“Hmm. But Miss Elias did mention that the experiment was being conducted at some place called Pig Wallow?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Hold on, Miss Dancer, while I look that up in the directory.”

April knew that he meant U.N.C.L.E.‘s alphabetic directory of cities, towns, villages and hamlets, which listed every corporate and unincorporated community on the North American Continent, along with its location and brief information about it.

Several minutes passed before Waverly came back on. He said, “Only one Pig Wallow is listed, a mountain village deep in the Missouri Ozarks. It has a population of only one hundred and fifty and is fifty miles from any main road. It can be reached only by a narrow mountain road so poor, a jeep is the recommended transportation. There is a small airport at Barth, Missouri, however, fifty miles from Pig Wallow, and jeeps are available there on a rental basis.”

“You want us to go there?” April asked.

“I haven’t been reciting this information just to hear my own voice, Miss Dancer,” Waverly said patiently. “Of course I want you to go there and find out what this experiment is all about. Naturally you will have to wait until the convention is over, because leaving sooner might excite suspicion.”

“Boris Rank and the Elias woman are leaving Saturday morning, sir. They aren’t staying until the convention ends.”

“Oh? Then you and Mr. Slate can catch the next plane out. You can’t very well leave at the same time, because your plane will go to St. Louis too.”

“Yes, sir,” April said.

FIVE

DEATH LIVES HERE

When April Dancer broke the connection Slate said, “Why do you always refer to Dorcus as the Elias woman?”

April thought for a moment, then grinned. “I told you I was a cat,” she said.

April found the banquet that evening rather dull. They had to endure several lengthy speeches following dinner. However, afterwards there was dancing, which salvaged something from the evening for her. She loved to dance, even when she knew her partner was a THRUSH agent.

This time it was Dorcus who broke up the evening at midnight, on the plea that she and her employer had to catch a seven o’clock plane. April suspected desire for sleep wasn’t Dorcus sole motive, however. The woman wanted a chance to be alone with Mark for a time.

Again Boris Rank escorted April to her room and Slate escorted Dorcus to hers.

April accepted a good night kiss and said good-by to Rank in the hall, without opening her door. He left a card with her, giving both his business and home addresses and phone numbers in case she ever got to St. Louis. She parried his request for her home address by telling him he could reach her through the Gruenwald Pet Food Company if he ever got to New York.

Ostensibly April’s vacation lasted until Monday. Just in case Rank decided to call her long-distance at the hotel after he got back to St. Louis, and might think it odd to learn she had checked out, she told him that since he was leaving in the morning, she had decided to return to New York also. He seemed flattered by the implication that without him she could no longer enjoy her vacation.

When Rank had left, April entered her room, undressed for bed, put on her robe and slippers and waited for Slate to appear. A little later she took out her compact, started to switch it on, then changed her mind, closed it and put it back in her purse. It was one thing to eavesdrop on a THRUSH agent, quite another to eavesdrop on her own partner.

At one she gave up waiting and climbed into bed. Five minutes later Slate’s code knock came at the door.

Switching on her bed lamp, April got up and slipped into her robe. She cracked open the door far enough to let him see one cold eye.

"What's the matter with you?" he asked. "Let me in."

"If you want into a woman's hotel room in the middle of the night, why don't you go back to the one you just left?" she suggested. "I'm sure you'd be welcome."

Slate looked, pained. "I had to tell her good-by. We don't want to arouse suspicion now."

"Of course not. Did you learn anything new during your lengthy good-by session?"

"Well, no," Slate admitted. "Except that she plans to vacation in Miami next winter."

"How delightful," April said. "You'll have to run down and rent a beach cottage."

She closed the door in his face. The next morning the phone awakened her at seven.

"Yes?" she said sleepily.

"Rank and Dorcus are gone," Slate's voice said. "We catch a plane for St. Louis in two hours. We change there to a local line that hops to Barth. Would you like breakfast?"

"Are you buying?" she asked.

"I wouldn't want to spoil your record," he said sarcastically.

April's penuriousness, even when on an expense account, was notorious throughout U.N.C.L.E. Mark Slate was always having to explain to Central Accounting why his expense voucher was twice as large as April's when they had been on the same assignment.

"I'll be ready in twenty minutes," April said.

With the time difference of an hour, it was only ten-thirty when their jet landed at Lambert Field in St. Louis. There they changed to a single-engine plane of the Ozark Line to fly to Barth. It was a trim little plane and had stewardess service, but it seemed to April that it landed in every cow pasture between St. Louis and Barth. The constant takeoffs and landings gave April a headache, and during the last hop she asked the stewardess for two aspirin.

Lunch had been served on the plane, so when they finally arrived at Barth at two-thirty, they rented a jeep and immediately took off for Pig Wallow. As usual Mark Slate drove. He always insisted on driving when they were together. It wasn't that he distrusted her driving, he frequently told April. It was merely that he trusted his more.

Mr. Waverly had understated the condition of the road. As Slate commented, the recommended form of transportation should have been mountain goat.

"How's your headache?" he asked after they had jounced over a particularly bad stretch of bumps and potholes.

"Fine," April said. "The aspirin on the plane did it."

Just outside of Pig Wallow they passed a small cemetery where a graveside service was taking place. Then, no more than fifty yards farther on, Slate had to pull over on the shoulder to let a funeral procession pass which presumably was heading for the same cemetery.

"Looks like the mortuary business in Pig Wallow is booming," Slate said.

When they reached the village, they found its single street in better condition than the road from Barth, but it still wasn't paved. It was merely hard-packed clay which probably became hub-deep mire when it rained. A boardwalk lined both sides of the street.

The business district consisted of a single filling station, a combination drugstore and general store with a sign in its window proclaiming that it also served as the post office, a tavern-restaurant, an undertaking parlor and a large two story frame house with a sign out in front reading: ROOM AND BOARD. A few weather-beaten frame houses clustered either side of the business district on both sides of the street. At the far end of town, just before the street came to an abrupt end at the base of a mountain, there was a one-room schoolhouse on one side of the street and a church on the other.

The village was situated in a cul-de-sac between two moderate-sized mountains which climbed steeply either side of it, plus the mountain at the far end of the only street. Perched on the mountainside to their right, about fifty yards from the backs of the buildings on that side of the street, was a long, flat-topped one-story building, apparently relatively new, which looked like some kind of factory. There was no sign on it to indicate what it was. The rear base of the building touched the mountainside, but the front was elevated on stilts. A steep path climbed up to the building from behind the boarding house.

There wasn't a person or a vehicle in sight.

Slate pulled into the filling station and parked next to the regular pump. A lanky, middle-aged man in overalls with a blank face came from the corrugated iron shack which served as an office.

"Fill it up," Slate said.

Both he and April got out of the jeep to stretch. The attendant silently inserted the hose nozzle in the tank vent, then raised the hood to check the oil.

Slate said, "Any points of interest in town?"

The attendant mulled this over so long, April thought he was ignoring the question. But finally he said, "Can't think of any, sir."

The sir surprised April. It had been her experience that mountain people tended to be an independent lot, usually polite, but rather belligerently un-subservient.

"What's that building up there?" she asked, pointing to the flat-topped building on the mountain side across the street.

The attendant squinted that way. Baking Company, ma'am."

Slate and April looked at each other. Slate said, "What's it's name?"

The attendant mused again. He had closed the hood, had hung up the gas hose and was now cleaning the windshield.

"Don't rightly know that it has a name, sir," he said presently. "We just call it the baking company. Feller named Radak runs it. Stays over to Ma Rooney's."

April and Slate exchanged glances again. Anton Radak was the name of the THRUSH agent whom Mr. Waverly had told them was introduced to Boris Rank by Dorcus Elias.

"What's Ma Rooney's?" April asked.

The man pointed across the street at the house with the BOARD AND ROOMS sign in front of it. "Boarding house, ma'am. Whole crew from the baking company stays there."

"Oh?" April said. "How many is that?"

"Just three aside from Radak, ma'am. It's just a small company, only been open about a month. Been a boon to Ma Rooney, though. She only had two other roomers, and they both died a couple of weeks back."

All this time the attendant had been answering April's and Slate's questions quite willingly, but in a totally uninterested tone. He moved and spoke in a strangely subdued manner which April assumed was due to mountaineer shyness in the presence of well dressed city folk.

Since the attendant seemed to have no resentment at their prying, April Dancer decided to get a little bolder.

"Are the men who work for Mr. Radak local?" she asked.

He had finished the windshield. He said, "No, ma'am. He brought 'em along with him from outside."

"Do you know their names?" Slate frowned at her, fearing such open prying might make the man clam up. But the attendant answered in the same uninterested tone as before.

"No, ma'am. They keep pretty well to themselves."

Slate shrugged, handed the man a bill. As he made change, April examined the jeep.

"We certainly collected a lot of dust," she said. "The jeep could use a wash."

The attendant handed Slate his change and started to draw a bucket of water. As April and Slate climbed back in the jeep, the man carried the bucket over in front of it and started to wash the hood with a sponge.

“What are you doing?” April said in astonishment.

“Said you wanted the jeep washed, ma’am.”

‘“Not now,” Slate said. “We haven’t time.”

The attendant shrugged, dumped out the water and set the bucket back next to the water hose. He stood there waiting to see if they wanted anything else.

Giving him a peculiar look, Slate drove the jeep as far as the edge of the street and braked.

“Odd bloke,” he commented.

“What now?”

“Let’s try that restaurant and bar across the street,” April said. “Maybe we can pick up more information there.”

Slate swung in a U-turn and parked before the tavern-restaurant.

SIX

“YE WITHOUT HOPE …”

Inside the tavern-restaurant they found a barnlike room with a bar running along one side and with booths around the walls. No one was in the place except a burly man of about forty whom they took to be the proprietor. He was sitting on a stool behind the bar.

As Slate and April took seats at the bar, the man rose from his stool and came over to stand before them. He offered no smile of greeting, but his expression wasn’t unfriendly.

There was a menu posted behind the bar. Examining it, Slate said, “That meal on the plane wasn’t very heavy. Feel like a sandwich?”

After looking over the menu, April said, “I could stand a grilled cheese.”

“Grilled cheese, a hamburger and two cups of coffee,” Slate said.

The burly proprietor moved silently over to the grill and began fixing the sandwiches.

April whispered, “Not overly talkative, is he?”

“Probably why he has so little business,” Slate murmured. Aloud he said, “Is it always this quiet in here?”

The man turned his head toward him, considered for a moment, then said, “Business hasn’t been too good the last few weeks, sir. Usually it’s some better.”

Sir again, April thought. The residents of Pig Wallow were certainly polite.

While the cheese sandwich was grilling and the hamburger was frying, the proprietor set before them paper napkins, salt and pepper, mustard and catsup, cream and sugar.

April said, “Why is the town so quiet? There isn’t a person on the street.”

The burly man thought this over carefully before saying, “Mostly they’re farmers, ma’am. Guess they’re working their farms outside of town.”

“But aren’t there any women?” she said.

He considered again, said, “Yes, ma’am. They stay inside pretty much. Guess they have housework.”

“It’s Saturday,” April persisted.

“The kids would be out of school. Aren’t there any children?”

The proprietor pursed his lips and looked vaguely puzzled. “Sure there’s children, ma’am. Guess they must be inside too. Haven’t seen any kids outside playing for some time, now you mention it.”

He walked back over to the grill. Slate and April looked at each other.

She said, “There’s something creepy about this town.”

“Uh-huh,” he said. “And I’ll bet you THRUSH is behind it.”

The man set their sandwiches before them and went to draw two cups of coffee from a small urn next to the grill. It was a deep black and turned a sort of muddy green when they added cream. April took a cautious sip, made a face and pushed the cup aside. Slate decided not even to try his.

“May we have some water?” he asked.

“Yes, sir,” the burly man said. He put a glass of water before each of them.

The man stood silently before them, gazing vacantly between them as they ate their sandwiches. When they finished, both took sips of water.

Slate said, “Know anything about the new baking company up on the mountainside?”

The man pursed his lips. “Run by a feller named Radak, stays over to Ma Rooney’s. Three other fellers staying there work for him, but I don’t know their names.”

April asked, “Are they running any kind of experiment up there?”

The man looked puzzled. “Don’t rightly know what you mean, ma’am.”

April shrugged. “If they are, I guess you don’t know much of anything about it.”

Slate said, “What do we owe you?”

“Sandwiches is thirty-five cents, sir. Coffee ten. Ninety cents altogether.”

April’s penuriousness came to the surface.

“We didn’t drink the coffee,” she said.

The proprietor blinked and regarded her worriedly. He seemed to be undergoing some kind of inner struggle between cupidity and a desire to please.

In a tentative voice he said, “You don’t want to pay for the coffee, it’s all right, ma’am.”

“I should think so,” she said.

“You try to drink it.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said.

As they watched in astonishment, he lifted April’s cup, drained it of the now lukewarm coffee, set it down and drained Slate’s cup.

Slate and April looked at each other, then back at the proprietor, who merely stood there placidly, seemingly waiting for further instructions.

April turned back to Slate. “Remember the filling station attendant

and his bucket?"

"Uh-huh," Slate said. "Seems' that in this town people do anything you suggest." He examined the burly man for a moment, then said, "Spread mustard on your ear, mister."

The man obediently lifted the spoon from the mustard pot. "Right or left, sir?"

"Never mind," Slate said. "Forget it." He dropped a dollar on the bar. "Keep the change. Let's get out of here, April."

Outside April said, "What now?" Slate glanced up and down the deserted street. His gaze settled on the combination drugstore and general store next door.

"May as well try in there," he said.

The store consisted of one large room about thirty feet deep and fifty in width. Although un-partitioned, it was divided into three sections. The center section, into which they entered, was the general store, and displayed everything from clothing to hardware. To the right was a grocery and meat department, to the left the drugstore. At the rear of the drugstore, next to the prescription department, was a caged enclosure with a sign over its window reading: *Mail.*

There were no customers in the store. An elderly man was behind the soda fountain on the drugstore side. An equally elderly woman, probably his wife, was marking cans in the grocery section. Both glanced toward April and Slate as they entered, but neither smiled nor gave any greeting.

"I'll check out the woman," Slate said in a low voice. "You try the man."

He turned right into the grocery and meat department. April turned left and went over to the fountain. When she took a stool, the elderly man merely gazed at her with the same polite lack of interest they had experienced from the filling station attendant and the tavern restaurant proprietor.

On impulse April said, "Put your right index finger in your ear."

Without the slightest show of surprise the old man said, "Yes" ma'am," and inserted his index finger in his ear. He stood there, gazing at her placidly.

After several minutes, when it began to seem obvious he was prepared to stand there forever with his finger in his ear unless she rescinded the order, she said, "Take it out."

He dropped his hand to his side.

Slate came over carrying a paper bag and munching on a sugar cookie. He offered the bag to April and she took one.

As though the old man weren't present, April said, "He's just like the others. I told him to stick a finger in his ear and he did it."

"So is she," Slate said, nodding toward the grocery department. "I

told her to balance a can of beans on her head and she did it."

April finished her cookie, got from the stool and said, "Let's go somewhere quiet and see if we can figure this out."

"Right," Slate said.

He popped another sugar cookie into his mouth and offered the bag to April. She shook her head. They left the store and went over to the jeep.

Looking up and down the street again, Slate said, "The only business places left are the funeral parlor and Ma Rooney's boarding house. Want to try them?"

"I would rather drive somewhere, park and try to figure this thing out," April said.

"Okay," he said agreeably.

He popped another cookie into his mouth, rounded the jeep and climbed under the wheel. April slid in next to him.

Slate drove out of town and parked across from the cemetery. The second service there was now over and the place was deserted. Slate offered April the cookie bag and she took a second cookie. He started on his fourth.

April said, "Remember when the Elias woman was giving Boris the devil for not taking better notes? She said something about it not doing them any good to have an obedient population if most of the population was dead."

"Uh-huh," Slate said. "Pretty obviously they're experimenting with a drug which induces abject obedience. Just as obviously they picked Pig Wallow because it gives them a control group well enough off the beaten track for it to be unlikely for the news of the peculiar condition of the natives to leak into the outside world. The bug in whatever the substance is they're experimenting with is that a cumulative overdose can be, fatal."

"We saw two funerals today," April said. "And the filling station attendant mentioned that two of Ma Rooney's boarders died a couple of weeks ago. Pretty heavy death rate for a village of only a hundred and fifty."

Slate held out the paper bag, which now had only one cookie left in it. When April shook her head, he took it, crumpled up the bag and dropped it on the floor of the jeep.

Thoughtfully munching on the cookie, Slate said, "In order to reach everyone, they must be administering the drug in something everybody consumes. The water supply, maybe?"

April considered this, then shook her head. "I didn't see any water reservoir, which means the homes must have individual wells."

"Hmm. Milk?"

"The bartender said most of the villagers are farmers. They

probably have their own cows." She paused, then said slowly, "The new company is a baking company. I've been assuming it's just a front for whatever THRUSH is doing here. But maybe they're actually baking bread up there and distributing it to the town. After all, everybody eats bread."

Slate stopped chewing and looked at her. He turned his head and spit the remnants of the cookie he was chewing into the road.

"If they're putting it into all baking products, you're a little late," she said. "That was your sixth cookie. Plus we each had a sandwich with two slices of bread."

"It probably takes more than that," he said without much assurance. "The people we talked to have been eating the stuff for a month. Do you feel all right?"

"Yes. Do you?"

"I hope it's just psychological," he said. 'But I'm starting to feel a little odd."

"How?"

"I don't know. Just odd." "Maybe we'd better drive back to Barth," she said. "We can tackle Pig Wallow again tomorrow, and this time avoid any baking products."

"Okay," he said. "Back to Barth."

He started the engine and pulled away.

SEVEN

THE MARK OF THE DAMNED

Ten miles further April Dancer said, “How are you feeling now, Mark?”

In a colorless voice he said, “Fine.”

She looked at him sharply. He was driving with his usual skill, but his face was totally expressionless.

“Pull over for a minute,” she said.

Slate obediently pulled to the side of the road and stopped. He continued to look straight ahead.

“Mark,” April said.

Turning to look at her, he said, “Yes, ma’am?”

Oh, brother, April thought. She said, “I think I’d like to drive.”

Without argument he climbed from the jeep and rounded to the other side. April slid over under the wheel. When Slate got in next to her, she took her transistor radio from her purse and called U.N.C.L.E. headquarters.

When she got Alexander Waverly, she said rapidly, “We’ve just left Pig Wallow, sir. We haven’t yet learned what THRUSH’S new drug is, but we do know its effect. It has converted the citizens of Pig Wallow into obedient zombies with no wills of their own. They seem to be able to go about their normal daily functions, but they obey every instruction given to them by anybody. You could tell an elderly dowager here to do the Can-Can and she would instantly obey.”

“I see,” Waverly said. “Have you discovered how it’s administered to the natives?”

“Unfortunately, yes. There is a new baking goods company here run by Anton Radak. The drug is being distributed in baked goods. Both Mark and I had sandwiches a while ago, and later some cookies. Mark just lapsed into the same obedient state as the natives. The reason I’m speaking so rapidly is that I’m afraid I may be next.”

“Hmm. Do you feel any effects yet?”

“No, sir. But it hit Mark awfully sudden. He’s just sitting here now, staring into space.”

Waverly said, “Better get him back here at once, Miss Dancer. Drive directly to the airport at Barth, and contact me again as soon as you get there. Since this drug seemingly causes obedience, you should be able to obey these instructions even if you lapse into the same condition as Mr. Slate. Don’t you agree?”

“I guess so, sir,” April said dubiously. “Providing somebody doesn’t give me counter instructions. We’ll see what happens.”

Mark Slate was still in the same placid, vegetable-like condition when they arrived at the Barth airport. April felt no change in herself. She left him in the jeep while she went to the office to check the flight schedule.

It was now six and she learned that a plane bound for St. Louis Was due to set down for five minutes at six thirty. She bought two tickets, turned in the key to the jeep and paid its rental. Slate was still seated quietly in the jeep when she returned.

She called U.N.C.L.E. headquarters over her communicator and reported to Mr. Waverly that Slate’s condition remained unchanged and that she still seemed unaffected.

“Perhaps you didn’t ingest as much of the drug as he did,” Waverly suggested. “Or perhaps it affects only men.”

“No, sir,” April said. “Mark had an elderly woman in Pig Wallow balance a can of beans on her head.”

“Indeed?” Waverly said with mild surprise. “Well, by whatever lucky chance you remained unaffected, we’ll hope your immunity continues until you get back here. Better check in periodically to report on your condition. Say every hour on the hour. “

“All right, sir,” April said.

Breaking the connection, she said to Slate, “Get out of the jeep, Mark.”

He obediently climbed from the jeep.

They had checked their suit cases in coin lockers at the Barth airport. Under April’s instructions Slate removed them from the lockers and carried them over to the baggage counter. He seemed in full possession of his faculties, and did such minor things on his own as lighting a cigarette and getting himself a drink of water at a fountain. It wasn’t that he was incapable of doing anything without instruction. It was just that he was incapable of not doing anything he was instructed to do.

It was midnight when April led Mark Slate down the hall at U.N.C.L.E. headquarters to Alexander Waverly’s office. They were expected, because April has been in periodic communication with Mr. Waverly all evening.

Randy Kovac and a plump, placid looking man were in the office with Waverly. April had met the plump man on several previous occasions, as he was occasionally called in as a consultant by U.N.C.L.E. and was the man who had conducted Mark Slate’s crash course in psychiatry.

“Good evening, Dr. Brow,” she said.

He gave her a friendly nod.

"Nice to see you again, Miss Dancer."

After greeting Mr. Waverly, April turned to Randy. "What are you doing up so late?"

"It's Saturday night," he said. "No school tomorrow."

No one had greeted Slate, but all were regarding him curiously. He stood there without expression, waiting patiently.

"You don't have to ignore him," April said. "He knows what's going on. He just hasn't any will of his own."

Waverly said somewhat self-consciously, "How are you, Mr. Slate?"

"Fine, sir," Slate said tonelessly.

Randy said, "Hi, Mr. Slate."

"Hello, Randy."

"He seems fully aware of his surroundings," Dr. Brow said. He pulled a chair away from in front of Mr. Waverly's desk into the center of the room. "Sit here, please, Mr. Slate."

Slate obediently sat in the chair.

The psychiatrist took his temperature and pulse, then examined his eyes with a small light.

"Temperature is slightly below normal," he announced. "The pulse is a bit retarded and his pupils react too slowly to light. Hold out your right hand palm up, please, Mr. Slate."

The patient held out his hand. Dr. Brow took hold of the end of the center finger and squeezed it. When he released it, the white mark faded very slowly.

The doctor said to Waverly, "He is definitely under the influence of some sort of narcotic, although I couldn't hazard a guess as to what." He turned to April. "I understand you ingested some of the drug too, Miss Dancer."

"I must have, if our guess that it's in baking products is right. I had two slices of bread in a sandwich and two of the same cookies that Mark ate."

Dr. Brow drew another chair alongside of Slate's, had April sit in it and examined her.

When he finished, he said, "You seem quite normal. Perhaps you didn't ingest enough of the drug to be affected. How many cookies did Mr. Slate have?"

"Six. He ate only about half of the last one."

"And you had but two. Still, considering the difference in body weights, I should think you would show some effect. What else did Mr. Slate ingest that you didn't?"

"Well, he had a hamburger while I had a grilled cheese sandwich. We both ordered coffee, but neither of us drank it, because it was awful"

Brow looked at Waverly. “Perhaps the drug is administered in meat.”

Waverly shook his head. “In a farming community such as Pig Wallow, the farmers tend to slaughter and dress most of their own meat. I think Miss Dancer’s guess that the drug is in baking products is probably right. Something must have made her immune to the drug. Or perhaps some people have a natural immunity.”

“Maybe cheese is an antidote,” Randy suggested

April smiled at the boy, Waverly frowned, but Dr. Brow gave the suggestion serious consideration.

“Something seems to have given Miss Dancer immunity,” he said. “Can you think of anything else you ate which Mr. Slate didn’t?”

The girl shook her head. “We both lunched on the plane from St. Louis to Barth and our meals were identical and we both had coffee. Neither of us had anything else since breakfast.”

“Perhaps it was the cheese,” Brow said. “When and if you obtain samples of this drug, Mr. Waverly, your research chemists should test cheese as a possible antidote.”

“I’ll keep it in mind,” Waverly said a trifle dubiously. “Meanwhile, what about Mr. Slate?”

“I would assume the effects of the drug are short-lived,” the psychiatrist said. “Otherwise it wouldn’t be necessary to administer it in a medium which people consume day after day. I suggest he simply be kept under observation until it wears off. Suppose I deliver him to the clinic upstairs and let him sleep there tonight?”

“Good idea, doctor,” Waverly said. “Would you be good enough to do that?”

Dr. Brow motioned Slate to his feet and led him from the room. Slate went out, unresisting.

Mr. Waverly rounded his desk, sank into his chair and said, “Sit down, Miss Dancer, and let us review what we’ve learned.”

Randy hurried to push one of the two chairs the psychiatrist had pulled away from the desk back into place. When April sat, he remained standing alongside of her.

Leaning back in his chair, Waverly said, “It is now obvious why Mr. Rank and Miss Elias are so interested in this new tranquilizer whose dosage doesn’t matter.

“Apparently, from the conversation you overhead between the two of them, and also from the unusual number of funerals occurring in Pig Wallow, the drug is fatal in too large cumulative doses. Since different people consume quite different quantities of bread and other baking products daily, control of dosage is impossible when the drug is distributed in this manner. Building the same properties possessed by Tehedrin zero fifty-five into their drug would solve their problem.”

Randy said, “Once the bugs are ironed out so that the drug isn’t fatal to a portion of the population, I suppose they plan to flood the country with their baking products.”

Waverly examined him benignly. “Of course, Mr. Kovac. And with the entire population in a state of complete loss of will, yet still able to carry out its usual tasks, the country can be taken over without a struggle. Even the president is a great bread eater.”

There was a low buzz from the panel of switches on Waverly’s desk and one of them lit up.

“Houston headquarters,” Waverly murmured, and flicked the switch upward.

A glass screen on the wall lit up. Napoleon Solo’s suave, handsome face appeared on the screen.

“Yes, Mr. Solo?” Waverly said.

“Hello, April,” Solo said. “Hi, Randy.”

When both had replied to the greeting, Waverly said patiently, “I assume this is not a social call, Mr. Solo. Get to the point.”

“Yes, sir. Illya and I arrived too late, sir.”

Waverly frowned. “Even after we sent Dr. Bromberger warning? Didn’t he take any precautions?”

“Yes, sir. He hired a night watchman and placed his supply of Tehedrin zero fifty-five in the clinic safe, but they got to it anyway. Dr. Bromberger reports nothing taken but the drug, and they took all of that.”

“Unfortunate,” Waverly said. “THRUSH, of course.”

“The caper shows all the signs of their technique. The watchman was drugged, the lock of the clinic door picked without breaking it and the safe was expertly cracked. There were no clues left, of course.”

“Very well, Mr. Solo. You and Mr. Kuryakin may as well return to New York. Thanks for your report.”

He depressed the lighted switch and the screen darkened.

“Well, it looks as though Miss Elias now has a supply of Tehedrin zero fifty-five to experiment with,” Waverly said. “There is nothing more we can do tonight. We’ll see how Mr. Slate is in the morning, and all meet here at nine A.M.”

EIGHT

LOOKING FOR A JOB

April Dancer arrived at U.N.C.L.E. headquarters at 8: 45 the following morning. She went directly to the clinic, only to find that Mark Slate had already been released and was down in Mr. Waverly's office.

When she got to Waverly's office, she found Slate and Randy there. Slate rose from his chair and smiled at her. Randy, as usual, was already standing.

"Morning, dove," Slate said in his normal tone.

"You're all better," April said in a relieved voice. "We were worried about you."

"The Slates are noted for their physical stamina," he said. "It's only our minds that are weak. Randy's been telling me how I behaved yesterday. I must have been something."

"Do you remember any of it?" April asked.

"All of it. It seems to be a peculiar faculty of this drug that you don't realize anything is wrong with you. I have a clear recollection of everything that happened yesterday, and I didn't realize until Randy told me that I was behaving peculiarly."

Mr. Waverly came in, looked Slate over carefully and said, "You seem to have recovered, Mr. Slate."

"Yes, sir," Slate said. "Sorry about yesterday."

"Perfectly excusable," Waverly said. "Actually your experience added something to our knowledge of this drug. We now know definitely that its effects wear off in less than twenty-four hours, and if it isn't continuously administered, people return to normal."

He rounded his huge desk, sank into his chair and gestured April and Slate to sit. Randy remained standing.

For Slate's benefit Waverly briefly went over the conclusions he, April and Randy had come to the night before. Then he said, "As Miss Dancer or Mr. Kovac may have told you, we learned last night that the entire experimental supply of Tehedrin 055 has disappeared from Dr. Bromberger's Houston clinic. It is almost certain that this is in the hands of THRUSH, or more specifically, in the hands of Miss Dorcus Elias."

Slate said, "Randy told me."

"Our next move is to determine just what the drug is that THRUSH is experimenting with. Mr. Slate, I want you to return to Pig Wallow.

Your first mission will be to obtain us a sample of the drug. The easiest and most obvious way to do that is simply to purchase a large supply of baked goods from the same store where you obtained those cookies. Mr. Solo and Mr. Kuryakin are due back from Houston today. I will send one of them with you to bring back the samples."

"Why can't I bring them back?" Slate asked.

"Because you are to remain in Pig Wallow. I want you to visit and talk to everyone in the village in order to determine if one hundred percent have been affected by the drug. If you discover any who are not under its influence, try to determine why. There may be some who eat no bread or other baked goods because they are on special diets.

"But if you encounter any bread eaters who seem to be immune to the drug, question them closely as to their other dietary habits. In particular learn if they regularly eat cheese."

"Cheese, sir?" Slate said.

"Dr. Brow thinks Miss Dancer's grill cheese sandwich may have caused her immunity."

Slate glanced at April with raised brows. Then he shrugged and said, "Yes, sir."

"I also wish you to find out how much the death rate has risen since the new baking company opened in Pig Wallow."

"Yes, sir," Slate said soberly.

"Do you want me to leave for there today?"

Waverly shook his head. "I talked to Dr. Brow on the phone this morning and he advises keeping you under observation for a day or two. It is possible this is a psychedelic drug, and Dr. Brow says that symptoms of such drugs sometimes recur after the initial effect has worn off. If you are still all right by Tuesday, the doctor thinks it will be safe to assume there will be no recurrence."

Waverly turned to April. "Your assignment is in St. Louis, Miss Dancer. You are to learn what success, if any, Miss Elias is having in analyzing Tehedrin zero fifty-five and building its unique property into their own drug."

April said, "Yes, sir. When shall I leave?"

"Not until Tuesday also. Your cover story will involve discovering you are out of a job when you returned from your vacation. And since presumably you were not to return to work until tomorrow, you could hardly discover it before then. If you will wait after Mr. Slate has left, we will go over the details."

Slate rose from his seat.

Randy Kovac said, "Mr. Slate."

Slate looked at him. "Yes, Randy?"

The boy grinned. "Don't eat any baked goods in Pig Wallow."

Early Tuesday morning Mark Slate drove alone in a jeep along the

rough mountain road between Barth and Pig Wallow. The back seat of the jeep was loaded with fishing gear. A helicopter hovered overhead for the whole distance, but Slate paid no attention to it.

When he reached the cemetery outside of town, Slate pulled off the road and stopped. The helicopter circled, then gently settled in a little clearing alongside the cemetery chapel.

Slate walked over as a lean blond man with a sensitive face and liquid brown eyes dropped lithely to the ground.

"I should have made you drive the jeep, Illya," Slate said. "That road is awful."

Illya Kuryakin smiled slightly."Senior agents are entitled to the smoother rides. How long do you think you'll be?"

Slate glanced at his watch. "It's seven-thirty. I should imagine the general store opens by eight. I'll try to be back by eight-fifteen."

Illya nodded. "I'll be here."

Slate returned to his jeep and drove on into town.

Again no one was on the street.

Slate parked in front of the combination general store and drugstore and tried its door. He found it open, but no one was in the place.

In the grocery and meat section he found a shopping cart and pushed it over to the baked goods section. All the wrapped bread here bore the trademark of the Rank Baking Company of St. Louis, he noted.

He loaded a dozen loaves of bread into the cart, added a miscellaneous collection of rolls, cookies and cakes. He had the cart filled when the old woman appeared from what was apparently sleeping quarters in back.

"I found the door unlocked," Slate said. "Are you open?"

"Not until eight," she said in a colorless voice. "I'll take care of you, though. We never lock the door. Nobody around here steals."

Slate paid for his purchases and carried them in a cardboard box out to the jeep. As he passed Ma Rooney's boarding house on his way out of town, a dark, thickset man stepped out on the porch and gazed after him curiously. From the front and profile photographs in the man's dossier at U.N.C.L.E. headquarters, Slate recognized him as Anton Radak.

When he got back to the helicopter he found that Illya Kuryakin had climbed back into it. He handed up the box of baked goods.

"Any trouble?" Illya asked.

Slate shook his head. "Anton Radak stepped out on the front porch of Ma Rooney's boarding house as I drove back out of town, but he probably took me for one of the locals. I imagine most of them drive jeeps. The country around here isn't suitable for anything else."

"Well, good luck," Kuryakin said.

He started the rotor, threw Slate a final wave of good-by and the helicopter rose from the ground. It was moving rapidly toward Barth when Slate returned to the jeep.

April's plane landed at Lambert Airport at ten Tuesday morning. From her purse she took the card Boris Rank had given her and phoned his office number. When she told his secretary it was April Dancer calling, he came on the phone immediately.

"April!" he said with pleasure.

"Where are you?"

"At the airport," she said. "I have an hour between planes and just phoned to say hello."

"Between planes? Where are you going?"

"To Los Angeles," she said in a rueful tone. "When I went into work yesterday, I found myself out of a job. Gruenwald is cutting back on personnel, I had the lowest seniority in the lab, so I got bounced while on vacation."

"Oh, I'm sorry," he said. "But why Los Angeles?"

"I have an uncle there. I'm going to stay with him until I find a new job."

"What's wrong with St. Louis?" Rank asked. "I have enough influence with this company to get you a job here. Go to work for us."

"Oh, I couldn't impose on our friendship," April said demurely.

"Nonsense. Your experience is in the food industry, even if it wasn't human food. You're a biochemist and Dorcus has been fussing at me to hire her another lab assistant. Why don't you cancel your reservation and stay over, at least tonight?"

"Well–"

"I insist," he said firmly. "What hotel do you wish to stay? I'll phone and make you a reservation."

"I'm not familiar with St. Louis hotels," she said.

"I'll get you a room at the Chase. That's only a few blocks from the plant. The Chase is at Lindell and we're on Delmar, only a couple of blocks away."

"All right," she agreed. "I'll cancel my reservation and have a taxi take me to the Chase."

When April hung up, she went over to the reservation desk. On the principle that cover should always be thorough, she actually had a ticket and a reservation through to Los Angeles. If anyone became suspicious enough to check her story that she had merely been passing through St. Louis, it would be on record that she had canceled her reservation on the noon jet to Los Angeles.

She had plenty of time after checking into the hotel to shower,

make up and put on a fresh print dress.

When she entered the lobby a fashionable five minutes late at a quarter after twelve, every man in the place turned to look at her.

She found Boris Rank already waiting in the lobby. He took both her hands in his and breathed, “You are lovely, my dear.”

“Thank you, sir,” she said demurely, dropping a mock little curtsey.

NINE

HOME BAKING

They lunched at the hotel, and during lunch April Dancer allowed herself to be talked into accepting employment with the Rank Baking Company.

"I have already talked it over with Dorcus," he said. "She asked me to bring you to the plant for an interview after lunch. I assume you have credentials with you."

"Oh, yes," April said, producing a couple of expertly forged documents from her purse.

She had a transcript from Columbia University showing that she had been an all-A student and held a B. S. in biochemistry. She also had a letter of recommendation from the Gruenwald Pet Food Company of New York, showing that she had worked in its research lab as a lab assistant for one year.

It rated her performance as excellent and explained that she had been let go solely because of lack of seniority when the company reduced its payroll.

With his usual thoroughness Mr. Waverly had made arrangements with both the university and the Pet Food Company so that the forgeries would be verified if they were checked back on.

"These look fine," Rank said after examining the papers. "I'm sure you'll fit in perfectly."

After lunch Boris Rank drove April over to the plant. It was a sizeable two-story building of brick a half-black long. The lower floor was devoted entirely to baking facilities, Rank explained. The upper floor contained the administrative offices and the laboratory.

They found Dorcus alone in the main laboratory of the research division, a large room containing several work tables and the standard equipment found in any chemistry and biological lab. The woman wore a white smock and had her hair drawn back in a severe bun.

She greeted April with the polite reserve April had come to expect of her, and again April was conscious of her suppressed hostility, Dorcus was the sort of woman who could develop real friendship with women considerably plainer than herself.

Apparently Dorcus was enough of a scientist not to allow her feminine instincts to interfere with her work, however.

After carefully examining April's spurious credentials, she thawed somewhat.

"Your background is just what I need," she said. "You'll have to wear your hair up at work, though, instead of hanging like that. Part of your work will be in the experimental kitchen, and we can't have hair falling into the dough. Can you start work tomorrow?"

"Yes, of course."

"Fine," Dorcus said. "I'll show you around now, and you can report for work at eight-thirty tomorrow morning."

Boris Rank told April that he would leave her in Dorcus's care, but when she was through touring the lab to come to his office just down the hall and he would direct her to personnel. It would be necessary for her to make out a formal employment application, he explained. Then he left her with Dorcus.

Dorcus took April on a tour of the room they were in first, explaining that the bulk of her work would consist of routine tests of the company's various products for quality control. A sample of each day's output of each product was tested, she explained, and had to meet certain minimum standards before it was approved for shipment.

"We are also constantly experimenting to improve our products and cut manufacturing costs," Dorcus said. "But you will have little to do with that until you become thoroughly oriented."

She led April into the room to the right of the laboratory, which proved to be a complete model kitchen. A young blond woman and a lanky redheaded young man, both in white smocks, were working here. Dorcus introduced them as Shelia Jennings and John Quade. Both were dieticians as well as chemists, April Dancer gathered.

As Dorcus and April moved back into the main room, April noted that there was another door on the opposite side of the lab.

"What's in there?" she asked. "Special research," Dorcus said briefly. "You'll have nothing to do with that."

She didn't offer to show the room.

April went up the hall to Boris Rank's office. Rank escorted her to the personnel section and waited while she filled out a brief employment application. Then he drove her back to the hotel.

"You will need an apartment," he told her en route. "I'll phone a realtor friend of mine and see if I can line you up one."

"That's kind of you," April said.

"But I would rather just stay at the hotel for at least a few days, until we see how I work out."

"Oh, you will work out fine," he said with confidence.

Rank didn't go into the hotel with her, as he had to get back to the office. He made a date to take her to dinner, though.

When she got up to her room, April called Mr. Waverly on her communicator.

"I got the job, sir," she announced. "I start work in the lab

tomorrow."

"Good work," he said. "Have you seen the lab yet?"

"Yes, sir. The Elias woman took me on a tour of it. There is a special research room she didn't offer to show me and which I suspect is kept locked, although I didn't get a chance to try the door."

"Hmm," Waverly said. "Better get a look at that at the first opportunity."

"Yes, sir," April said. "I plan to."

When Mark Slate drove the jeep back into the village, three male figures were trudging up the steep path to the building on the mountainside. They all paused to peer down at him. From the shapes of their bodies he knew that the thickset Anton Radak was not among them.

He parked before the combination drugstore and general store, cutting off their view of him, and went inside.

The old man was again behind the soda fountain. The old woman was in the mail cage, in the act of handing a couple of letters through the window to a wide-shouldered, heavyset man whose back was to Slate.

Going over to the soda fountain, Slate said, "Hi. Wonder if you could give me some information?"

"Certainly, sir," the elderly druggist said.

The man at the mail window turned and Slate saw that it was Anton Radak. The THRUSH agent had a broad, heavy-featured face with a hooked nose and hooded eyes. A frown drew beetling black brows together.

Slate said, "They told me over at Barth that there is a good trout stream near here. Could you tell me how to get there?"

"Yes, sir. You must be talking about Critter Crick. Did you notice that cemetery just outside of town?"

"Uh-huh. On the right."

"Yes, sir," the old man said. "Well, you drive right in there. There's a road goes all the way to the back. You can park there, then walk about a hundred yards back in the woods and you'll hit the stream."

"Thanks," Slate said. "I plan to be here a couple of days. Any place to stay in town?"

"Yes, sir. Ma Rooney's, just up the street that way." He pointed. "You can't miss it, because there's a sign out front."

"Thanks again," Slate said. Anton Radak came over and gave Slate a smile which failed to reach his hooded eyes.

"I am a fisherman too, mister," he said with a slight Balkan accent. "You were given false information at Barth. There has been so little rain here, Critter Crick is all but dried up. I know a much better place

to fish."

"Oh?" Slate said. "Where?"

"At Clive Corners, about forty miles the other side of Barth. The trout are really hitting there."

Slate said ruefuIIy, "It's too late for me to change plans. I only have two days, and I don't want to spend any more of it driving. By the time I drove another ninety miles over these roads, the best part of today would be shot. I'll take my chances here."

Radak accepted this with a shrug. "As you wish. In that case I will be glad to accompany you to Ma Rooney's and introduce you. I stay there myself." He held out his hand. "My name is Radak. Anton Radak."

"Mark Slate," the U.N.C.L.E. agent said.

"Did I see you driving out of town a short while ago?" Radak asked.

"Probably," Slate said easily.

"Nothing was open when I pulled into town. I took a crack at finding Critter Crick Without directions, but had to give up."

Belatedly Slate wondered if Radak had asked the old couple about him. If he had, and knew Slate had purchased a sizeable supply of baked goods, Slate was in trouble. However, the man seemed to accept his explanation at face value.

As the boarding house was only a few doors away, Slate left the jeep where it was. As the two of them walked along the boardwalk, Radak pointed out the flat-topped building on the mountainside.

"That is where "I work, Mr. Slate.

It is a baking company. I am the local manager."

"I see," Slate said.

"However, you will not taste our products while you are here. Ma Rooney does all her own baking. Even though we put out superior baked goods, I must confess that our mass production methods cannot match her home baking."

The man was clever, Slate thought. He obviously had no intention of letting Slate get hold of any of his own product. He had no desire to have an outsider who would be in town only two days become drugged, perhaps die of an overdose and bring in outside investigation. Apparently he had decided to wait out the two days and hope that Slate noticed nothing unusual about the town.

When they reached the boarding house, Anton Radak opened the door and led Slate into a large front room furnished in mid-Victorian style. There was a huge mohair sofa before an empty fireplace, several overstuffed chairs with doilies on them, a rocking chair, some intricately carved marble-topped end tables and a number of lamps with beaded shades.

Across the room an open staircase led to the second floor and a narrow hallway next to the stairs led to the rear of the house. Through an archway to the left Slate could see a dining room with a long table capable of seating up to a dozen. A door at the rear of the dining room he assumed led into the kitchen.

There was an odor of baking bread in the air.

Radak called, "Mrs. Rooney!" A plump, matronly blond woman in her mid-fifties came from the kitchen. Slate could tell even before she spoke that she wasn't under the influence of the obedience drug. Her round face was too jolly and her eyes held too alert a twinkle.

"This is Mr. Slate, Mrs. Rooney," Radak said. "He is here to do some fishing for a couple of days and needs a place to stay."

The woman smiled at Slate and said, "How do you do?"

Slate said, "It's nice to know you, Mrs. Rooney."

"Everybody but Mr. Radak calls me Ma," she said. "Mr. Radak is the formal type." She said this in such a pleasant, bantering tone, the man couldn't possibly have been offended.

"All right, Ma," Slate said, smiling back at her.

"Room and board is five dollars a day on a short-term basis, Mr. Slate. Otherwise twenty dollars a week. Is that satisfactory?"

"Just fine," Slate said.

"I'll show you your room."

She led the way up the stairs to the second floor. Radak stayed below.

There were a half dozen rooms plus a bath off the long second-floor hallway. Ma Rooney led him to the last one at the end of the hall. The room was not very large and contained only a single bed. It too was furnished in mid-Victorian style, with a marble-topped dresser whose mirror frame was elaborately carved and with a heavy writing desk with carved legs before the window.

The room was at the back of the house; and through the window Slate could see the building up on the mountainside.

"Sorry I have to give you this small room," the landlady said apologetically. "But all the others are full now. Three of Mr. Radak's employees stay here too."

"The room is fine," Slate said.

TEN
TIME FOR DYING

Ma Rooney said, "I would be out of business now if Mr. Radak and his men hadn't moved to town. I had two other rooms when they moved in, but they died a couple of weeks ago."

"Oh? Of what?"

"The epidemic."

"Epidemic?"

"Something's been going around for about a month. We really don't know what it is, but about a dozen so far have died of it."

"What do the doctors say?" Slate asked.

The landlady laughed. "What doctors? People have to drive clear to Barth to see a doctor. Mostly they just call in old Jed Harkins, the vet, when they have an ailment or expect a baby. Jed's all right for setting a broken bone or delivering a baby, but he don't know much about germs. He don't know what it is. He keeps saying heat exhaustion, but he don't really know."

"Heat exhaustion in June?" Slate said.

"Well, we did have a right smart hot spell. But we've had 'em before, and people didn't drop off like flies. "

"What are the symptoms?"

"First people lapse into a sort of trancelike state, then go into a coma and just pass away. My personal opinion is that it's some kind of food poisoning. All the meat around here comes from local farms, you know, and slaughtering methods ain't always too sanitary. There's a fatal disease you can get from pork, for instance."

"Trichinosis," Slate said. "That's it. I cook everything thoroughly here since the epidemic started. You won't get no rare meat at my table, so you don't have to worry."

Slate briefly wondered why no one had bothered to call in a health inspector, then immediately realized that with the whole town under the influence of the drug, no one possessed that much initiative.

"Didn't your two boarders eat here?" he asked.

"Weren't boarders, just roomers. Worked for one of the local farmers, and part of their pay was board. They just rented rooms from me at five dollars a week."

That explained that, Slate thought. Their failure to stick to Ma Rooney's cooking had cost them their lives.

"Well, I'll go get my stuff from the car," he said. "What is the meal schedule?"

Breakfast was at seven, she told him, lunch at noon and dinner at six. She offered to make him early breakfast if he wanted to start fishing at dawn.

"We'll see how the trout are hitting first," Slate told her.

As they went back downstairs, Radak was just hanging up a phone on the wall next to the staircase.

"I just phoned the plant that I will not be in," he said. "I have a couple of days coming, so I decided to go fishing too. Do you mind a partner?"

The man had no intention of letting him out of his sight while he was in town, Slate realized. This was going to complicate matters.

There was nothing he could do except say politely, “Of course not. Glad to have company.”

“Are you planning to go out this morning?” Radak asked.

“After I unload my stuff and stow it in my room.”

“I have to pick up a few things at the general store,” Radak said. “I will be ready to leave in about fifteen minutes, though.”

They walked back to the combination drugstore and general store together. While Radak was inside, Slate backed the jeep down to the boarding house and carried his suitcase inside. Alone in his room, he decided this would be a good time to report in.

Removing his fountain pen from his pocket, he twisted the barrel and a small antenna of chrome steel shot up. “Section two,” he said. “Mark Slate calling.”

After a moment Randy Kovac’s cheerful voice said, “Hi, Mr. Slate.”

“What are you doing there?” Slate asked. “Why aren’t you in school?”

“It’s only eight-fifteen,” Randy said. “I don’t have to be there until eight-thirty, and it only takes me ten minutes from here.”

“Put Mr. Waverly on and skedaddle,” Slate said.

“Yes, sir. Here he is now.” Alexander Waverly’s voice said, “Yes, Mr. Slate?”

“Illya is en route back with a supply of baked goods, sir,” Slate said. “I’m ensconced at Ma Rooney’s boarding house, but I’ve run into a snag. Anton Radak has decided to take off work and go fishing with me for the next two days. So I guess I’m going to actually have to fish.”

“He’s suspicious of you?” Waverly said sharply.

“I don’t think so,” Slate said. “He just wants to keep me under constant observation. I suspect he wants to steer me clear of the natives so that I won’t notice their odd behavior, but that he also wants to make sure I don’t accidentally get drugged. It obviously wouldn’t be wise to involve a stranger who only plans to be here two days in their experiment. Incidentally Ma Rooney does her own baking and isn’t under the influence of the drug.”

Waverly said, “Hmm. This is going to handicap your effort to interview everyone in the village.”

“Yes, sir. Unless I can think up some way to shake him.”

“It would be helpful if you could escape him at least long enough to interview the local undertaker. And if your landlady is in full possession of her faculties, perhaps you can get some information about the general state of the populace from her.”

“Yes, sir. I’ve already learned from her that there have been about

a dozen deaths in the past month."

"Odd that so many deaths from unknown causes haven't brought in health inspectors."

"Who would request them, sir? Everybody's in a drug-induced trance. At least everybody in authority. And there are no doctors here. The local vet, who is probably also under the influence of the drug, serves as the local doctor."

Waverly said, "Well, learn what you can, Mr. Slate. And keep me informed."

"Yes, sir," Slate said.

As Slate had arrived in town wearing his fishing clothes, it wasn't necessary for him to change. All he had to do was clap on the battered old fedora with his favorite flies stuck in the band, and he was all ready.

When he left his room, Radak was just emerging from a room up the hall. He had changed his business suit to slacks and a sport shirt and wore an old Panama hat.

"I took the liberty of loading my fishing gear in your jeep, Mr. Slate," he said. "Are you all ready?"

"Uh-huh," Slate said. "Let's get going."

As they went down the stairs together, Radak said, "Shall I have Mrs. Rooney make us some sandwiches?"

"We won't stay out past noon," Slate told him. "Trout won't hit when the sun gets high. I would as soon break off before noon and try again in the late afternoon, if we haven't got our limits by noon."

"As you wish," Radak said agreeably.

There was a brand new fly rod, a brand new creel and a brand new set of waders in the back seat of the jeep along with Slate's fishing gear. Obviously Radak had just purchased it all at the general store, which made a lie of his previous inference that he was familiar with the local trout stream.

Slate made no comment about the new equipment, however.

Following the elderly druggist's directions, they had no difficulty finding the stream. Slate had half expected to run into another funeral at the cemetery, but the place was deserted.

Critter Crick turned out to be a narrow but swiftly moving mountain stream with many twists and turns.

It was far from "all but dried up," as Radak had indicated. As a matter of fact it struck Slate as the kind of stream which should be loaded with trout.

"You work upstream from here," Slate suggested. "I'll walk downstream a quarter mile or so and work back to this point."

"Why don't we fish together?" Radak objected.

Slate frowned at him. "Who ever heard of trout fishermen working

in pairs?"

"I guess your suggestion is best. When shall we meet?"

"How about eleven-thirty? That will get us back to Ma Rooney's in time for lunch."

"All right," Radak agreed. He seemed very relaxed, at ease.

Slate turned and started along the bank downstream. Anton Radak sat on a log and began putting on his waders.

A quarter mile downstream Slate stopped when he came to a promising looking pool, and put on his waders. He had contemplated circling around to the jeep, driving into the village to interview a few residents and getting back again in time to meet Radak, but had rejected the idea as too dangerous. He suspected the man wasn't very interested in fishing, and might merely take up a concealed position where he could keep the jeep under observation.

Slate decided he might as well enjoy himself.

He chose a fan winged Royal Coachman to try first. Making an expert cast from the bank, he dropped the fly into an eddy beneath overhanging boughs on the opposite side of the stream. There was a flash of silver, a sharp tug on the line, and then line was streaming off the reel as the fish headed downstream.

Playing it carefully, it took Slate fifteen minutes to land the trout. He hadn't brought a net, so he had to wade into the water in order to get his hands on it. He carefully wet his left hand, then, at the proper moment, reached out, hooked a finger into one of the gills and flipped the fish up onto the bank.

At the same moment he stepped on a slippery rock and his right foot slid out from under him.

He was only in about a foot and a half of water, right next to the bank. Feeling himself falling backward, he flung his rod up on the bank and twisted around to catch himself on his hands on the side of the bank. He managed the maneuver so that he fell forward instead of backward, but his hands came down either side of a large boulder and the left side of his chest smashed painfully against the boulder.

Getting his feet under him, he pushed himself erect and climbed out on the bank. The fish was a brown fully eighteen inches long. Slate looked down at it admiringly, while he probed at his chest to see if he had broken anything. He was going to have a painful bruise, he decided, but otherwise was un-damaged.

He unhooked the fish, dropped it into his creel and picked up his fly rod.

If there had been any other trout in the pool, his noisy fall had frightened them away, because no others rose to his fly. The water upstream was full of trout, however. When he waded into the stream and began to work upstream, he had his limit within an hour.

Just for the sport of it he continued fishing and throwing them back. By eleven-thirty, when he had worked back to his starting point, he had hooked and released six good sized browns over his limit.

He found Anton Radak waiting, his waders folded and lying on the ground.

As Slate climbed out of the water, Radak said, “I told you the fishing here was bad. I did not get a single bite.”

Bite, Slate thought sardonically. Radak was some trout fisherman. Trout fishermen got rises or strikes, not bites.

Silently he opened his creel and showed the six beauties in it.

“You must be a luckier fisherman than I am,” Radak growled irritably.

ELEVEN

STOYLE'S MORTUARY

When they got back to the boarding house, Ma Rooney accepted the fish gratefully and said she would prepare the fish for dinner that evening.

"Lunch in ten minutes," she told them. "You just have time to wash up."

When Slate came back downstairs after washing his hands, he found three strangers in the front room with Anton Radak. The thickset man introduced them as his employees. A thin, brittle looking man of middle-age was introduced as Kurt Shill. A stout blond man of about Slate's age was named Josef Donner. A younger, rather dull-featured redhead was named Rudolph Betz. All three had slight, vaguely foreign accents.

"Mr. Radak says you are a fine fisherman, Mr. Slate," the thin Kurt Shill said after introductions. "I understand you had good luck."

"I got my limit," Slate admitted, "'Which leaves me with nothing to do until tomorrow."

"You will fish no more today?"

"You're only allowed to take six in any one day," Slate told him. "It's just as well. I drove half the night getting here, and can use an afternoon nap."

"Where did you start from?" Josef Donner asked.

"Little Rock."

"You live there?"

"Uh-huh. Run an auto agency. I just decided to take a couple of days off."

Apparently his ready answers satisfied the men that he was only what he claimed, for they asked no more personal questions. After lunch, when Slate announced he was going to spend the afternoon napping, Radak decided he would go to work after all.

From the window of his room Slate watched the four men climb the steep path to the building on the mountainside and disappear inside.

Stripping off his fishing clothes, Slate put on a white shirt, necktie and suit. Quietly he descended the stairs. He could hear Ma Rooney doing dishes in the kitchen. He let himself out the front door and eased it shut behind him.

The funeral parlor was on the opposite side of the street and only a

few doors away. It was a two-story white frame building set on about a half acre of ground and surrounded by a six-foot-high hedge.

Slate glanced up at the building on the mountainside on the opposite side of the street. The front door of the mortuary would be in full view of anyone watching from there, he saw. Slipping through the gap in the hedge which gave entry to a graveled driveway, he rounded to a side entrance.

He found himself in a small lobby. Directly in front of him, across a hall leading to the front door, was the main chapel. He could see a flower-covered coffin in it. To his right was a smaller chapel. Through the open door he could see a coffin there too.

He moved out into the hall, spotted a small stand containing two open visitor's registration books and went over to look at the names in their fronts. One of the deceased was a Miss Lydia Hopper, the other a Curtis Long.

A tall, middle-aged man dressed in black and wearing a solemn expression appeared from a room at the rear of the hall and slowly approached.

In a hushed voice he said, "Are you a relative of one of the deceased, sir?"

Slate did some quick thinking.

Claiming kin to either of the deceased might elicit questions he couldn't answer. The Miss in front of Lydia Hopper's name indicated she had been unmarried. He decided that, without actually saying so, he would give the impression he was an old boy friend of the woman's.

"Not a relative," he said. "Just a dear, dear friend of Lydia's."

The man looked vaguely puzzled. "Ah, yes, Miss Hopper. I am Myron Stolye, the funeral director."

"Mark Slate," Slate said, offering his hand.

Myron Stoyle grasped it limply, gave it a jerky shake and dropped it. "A pleasure, Mr. Slate. I know you're not local, because I know everyone in Pig Wallow. May I ask where you are from?"

"Little Rock."

"You came quite a distance," said the funeral director. "I didn't know Miss Hopper knew anyone in Little Rock."

"Our relationship goes back a number of years," Slate said vaguely.

Myron Stoyle looked even more puzzled. Then, suddenly, he winced and touched his forehead. The man seemed in full possession of his faculties and Slate was quite sure he wasn't under the influence of the drug. But the gesture made him ask, "What's the matter? Are you ill?"

"Just migraine," Stoyle said.

"I've suffered from it for years. I practically live on aspirin. Would

you like to view the departed?"

Slate didn't particularly care to, but he knew it would seem strange to refuse.

"All right," he agreed.

Myron Stoyle led him into the main chapel. The deceased was an old, wrinkled woman who must have been in her mid-eighties.

So much for his clever pose as an old boy friend, Slate thought. No wonder the funeral director had looked puzzled.

"What did she die of?" Slate asked.

Stoyle looked slightly uncomfortable. "From heat exhaustion, they think."

"Heat exhaustion?" Slate said, "It isn't all that hot. It can't be over eighty, and it's only the middle of June."

"It isn't bad now," Stoyle agreed.

"But we had a severe heat wave for the past month. I dread to think what it will be like during July and August. There have been a number of deaths."

His tone didn't match his foreboding words about July and August. Slate got the impression he was looking forward to a boom with some relish.

Slate said. "How many deaths"

"Fourteen in the past month."

Slate hiked his eyebrows. "All from heat exhaustion?"

Again Stolye looked uncomfortable. "Actually there was only one autopsy. One of the early cases happened to be in Barth when he became ill, and died in the hospital there. Cause of death wasn't definitely established, but the pathologist said it might have been heat exhaustion. Isn't it logical to assume they may all have been from that?"

He looked anxiously at Slate. He was afraid of what was going on in town, Slate realized.

"Sounds logical to me," Slate assured him. "You don't subscribe to the epidemic theory, then?"

The funeral director blinked. "Oh, you've heard that rumor. No, I don't subscribe to it at all, and don't know anyone else who does, except Mrs. Rooney at the boarding house. She started it."

Slate decided to press farther. He said, "Haven't you noticed anything strange about the villagers in general recently, Mr. Stoyle?"

Stoyle touched his forehead and momentarily closed his eyes as though in pain. When he opened them again, he said, "Excuse me. My migraine is acting up. There has been a recent general lethargy. I'm sure it's the heat. Then too, there has been so much people are naturally subdued good portion of them have lost dear ones and relatives."

He was backing away from the evidence of anything being wrong with the town, Slate saw.

Since the subject was upsetting Stolye, Slate changed it. He said, "This may sound like a strange question, but does your wife do her own baking?"

"I'm a bachelor. Mr. Slate,"

"Oh. Do you eat bread?"

The funeral director looked puzzled. "Of course I eat bread. Every day."

"From the local store?" Slate persisted.

"Yes. The product of the new bakery up on the mountainside."

"Hmm. Are you on any kind of special diet?"

Myron Stoyle shook his head. "I eat quite normally. What are you getting at, Mr. Slate?"

"Just a hobby of mine, Mr. Stoyle. I'm interested in dietetics. Do you eat much cheese?"

Stoyle seemed to decide he had run into some kind of nut, and had better humor him. He said patiently, "Occasionally. It is hardly a staple of my diet."

Slate gave a resigned shrug. He moved back into the hall and the mortician trailed after him.

"Miss Hopper's funeral is at ten Thursday morning," he said. "Usually protestant services are in the afternoon, but we can't fit it in because the other one is that afternoon. Will you attend?"

"Afraid I won't be in town that long," Slate said. "I just dropped in to pay my respects."

He moved on out the side door.

The funeral director stood staring after him puzzledly until he pulled the door closed behind him.

Slate managed to get back to his room without encountering the landlady. He changed back to his old clothes, then took out his pen-communicator and twisted the barrel. The antenna failed to rise.

Examining it, he found a small dent in the barrel. Where he had fallen on the rock, he realized. The pen had been in his shirt pocket and he had fallen right on it.

He worked on it for some time and finally got the antenna elevated, but the communicator was dead. Ruefully he dropped it into his suitcase.

TWELVE

THE TRAP

Tuesday evening, when Boris Rank took April to dinner, she insisted on getting back to the hotel early on the excuse of wanting to be fresh and alert for her first day of work. He gave in rather reluctantly and she managed to get to bed by ten.

When she reported for work the next morning, Dorcus examined her critically, noted that her hair was pinned up into a bun and nodded approval.

"Today I just want you to observe John and Shelia," Dorcus said. "They will run all the routine tests this morning. Tomorrow you can take over that chore completely.

"All right," April said.

"I won't be able to give you any personal supervision today," Dorcus went on. "I have a special research job which will keep me busy. But John and Shelia can answer any questions you have."

"All right," April said again.

"Get April a lab smock, Shelia," Dorcus told the young lab technician. Then she unlocked the door of the special research lab and disappeared through it.

"What she working on in there?" April asked.

Shelia Jennings shrugged. "She doesn't say, and John and I aren't allowed in there. I think she's just doing research on her doctorate on company time, but John thinks it's some kind of top secret government project. John's a little nuts, you know."

Shelia brought April a white laboratory smock and April slipped into it. The rest of the morning she merely watched the two young technicians run routine lab tests, asking questions when she felt they were pertinent. Her crash course in biochemistry had given her just enough background to bluff her way through the morning.

The last of the tests had been finished by ten of twelve. John and Shelia slipped out of their smocks, and April followed suit.

"You want to lunch with us, or do you have other plans?" John Quade asked.

The door from the hall opened at that moment. Boris Rank said, "She has other plans."

Shelia and Quade looked at each other and shrugged. By that evening it probably would be all over the plant that the big boss had a crush on the new lab girl, April thought. The two young technicians

went on through the door Rank had just entered.

The door to the private lab opened and Dorcus looked out. When she saw Rank, she said with a suppressed air of excitement, “Come in here a minute please, Boris.”

He went into the room with Dorcus and dosed the door behind him.

April lifted her purse from where it lay on a counter and lifted her small transistor radio from it. Making an adjustment of the dial, she silently tiptoed across the room and pressed its back against the door of Dorcus’ private lab.

Dorcus’ voice came from the speaker clearly. “I’ve solved it, Boris,” she said in a voice of triumph. “It was so simple, I can hardly believe it. I merely mixed the two substances half-and-half.”

“And?” Boris Rank’s voice said. “I’ve administered what should have been fatal overdoses to five rats. Not one has died.”

“Excellent,” Rank said with enthusiasm.

Dorcus’ voice said, “We’ll need a substantial supply of Tehedrin zero fifty-five, of course. I have run analyses on it, however, and it won’t be difficult to manufacture. The lab facilities at the other plant are more adequate for that than this small lab, though, so I’m going to fly down there for a few days.”

“Today?”

“As soon as I have some lunch and can get to the airport.”

There was momentary silence. Just in time April sensed that the conversation was over and the two were on the verge of stepping into the main lab. She took two fast steps away from the door, simultaneously making an adjustment of the radio.

Dorcus emerged from the lab first. She paused and her eyes momentarily narrowed when she saw April standing near a work counter only a few feet from the door. Then her suspicion died when she realized the girl was listening intently to the noon weather report coming over the radio.

“Heavy rain predicted for southern Missouri,” April said casually. “It’s supposed to miss St. Louis, though.”

She clicked off the radio, crossed to where she had left her purse and dropped it into the purse.

Dorcus said, “I’m going to be out of town for a few days, April. With you here to help Shelia and John now, the three of you should be able to manage. Are you learning the ropes?”

“We’ll get along all right,” April said. “It’s very similar to my work at Gruenwald. Where are you going?”

“To visit one of our other plants.”

She took off her lab smock, hung it from a wall hook and hurried out into the hall.

"Are you all ready?" Rank asked April.

"All ready," she said.

Rank took April to lunch at a restaurant only a few blocks from the plant. During lunch she casually asked where the other plant was that Dorcus had gone to.

"In a small town south of here," he said vaguely.

April didn't pump him further, but she was reasonably certain the plant was the one at Pig Wallow. After lunch she excused herself to go to the powder room.

Making sure that the room was deserted, she took out her radio-communicator and called U.N.C.L.E. *headquarters.*

When Alexander Waverly answered, she said, "There's been a development, sir. First, the Elias woman has solved the dosage problem. By mixing THRUSH'S drug half-and-half with Tehedrin zero fifty-five, she's discovered that what should have been a fatal overdose doesn't kill rats."

"Hmm," Waverly said. "You said first. Is there more?"

"Yes, sir. Apparently there is a lab at the plant in Pig Wallow. She plans to manufacture a supply of Tehedrin zero fifty-five there. She's on her way there now."

"Oh?" Waverly said. "In that case we had better get Mr. Slate out of Pig Wallow. It wouldn't do to have Miss Elias find him there."

"What I thought," April said. "You'll contact him to warn him?"

"As soon as I'm finished with you, Miss Dancer. Anything else?"

"Only that with the Elias woman away, I should have a chance to look at her private lab this afternoon. I'll report back on what I find."

"Good," Waverly said. "I'll expect to hear from you then."

When April got back from lunch, John Quade announced that he and Shelia were undertaking a new project in the experimental kitchen and asked April to watch. She remained with them about fifteen minutes, then, when they became involved in a discussion of ingredients for a new sweet roll they were trying to invent, unobtrusively drifted out into the main lab.

Crossing the room, she tried the door to the special research lab. As she had expected, it was locked. She plucked from her hair the spring steel hairpin and went to work on the lock with the picklock side of it. Within moments she had the door open. Slipping inside, she closed and locked the door behind her.

It was a small room, but completely equipped for both chemistry and biological research. In one corner was a tier of cages full of white rats. The rodents set up a chittering sound when they saw her.

She went over to examine the cages. The top one was labeled: *Control Group for 1/2 Z-17, 1/2Tehedrin 055 5 mg. ea.*

There were five rats in the cage. They weren't chittering like the

ones in the other cages. They merely sat and regarded her solemnly, in much the same attitude of patient waiting as the filling station attendant, the tavern-restaurant proprietor and the two old people in the drugstore-general-store in Pig Wallow. They all looked healthy enough, however.

She looked at the label on the cage again. Z-17 was Dorcus' code name for THRUSH's obedience drug, she decided. She examined the labels of all the bottles and boxes of chemicals on the shelves over the work table, but found none which read Z-17. She found no Tehedrin zero fifty-five either. Dorcus must have taken her whole supply of both drugs with her.

Her disappointment was somewhat allayed by finding a ruled legal pad filled with notes in one of the drawers. April couldn't completely understand the notes, because they were studded with complicated chemical symbols, but her crash course in biochemistry at U.N.C.L.E. headquarters had given her enough knowledge to make out what they were about.

The girl from U.N.C.L.E. realized the notes contained a complete description of both Z-17 and Tehedrin zero fifty-five, plus the results of Dorcus' experiments with both.

April slipped off the rhinestone ring she was wearing. Laying the notepad flat on the counter, she held the ring about a foot and a half above the first page, stone down, and pressed a secret catch. There was a small but audible click.

She repeated the process for each page of the notes, then replaced the pad where she had found it.

Slipping the ring back on her finger, she unlocked the door and cracked it open.

She peeked out just in time to see Boris Rank enter the lab. He glanced around, then went over to the door of the experimental kitchen.

"Where's Miss Dancer?" he asked.

Shelia Jennings' voice said, "She was here a minute ago, Mr. Rank. I didn't notice her leave."

Boris Rank started to turn around. Intuitively April knew he was going to look toward the door of the private lab. She eased it shut before he could complete the motion and let the spring bolt click home. The noise sounded loud to her, but she hoped the closed door had muffled it enough so that Boris Rank hadn't heard it.

Footsteps approached and the knob turned as Rank tried the door. April stood with bated breath, Wondering if he had a key to the room, and if he would decide to use it if he had one.

She got the answer to both questions a second later. A key rasped in the lock.

April Dancer pressed her back against the wall on the hinged side of the door. The door opened and Boris Rank stepped half inside. He took one quick glance around the room, then backed out and pulled the door closed again. April heard his almost silent footsteps recede across the lab toward the experimental kitchen.

A moment later she heard Rank's muffled voice say something from across the way, and knew from its distant sound that this time he had gone all the way into the experimental kitchen instead of pausing in the doorway. Drawing the spring bolt, she cracked open the door and peeked out.

Through the open door across the way she could see John Quade, profile to her, stooped before an oven. Apparently Shelia and Rank were in the center of the room, because she couldn't see either of them.

April took a chance that Quade wouldn't glance her way, slipped out into the main lab and clicked the door shut behind her. She was tiptoeing toward the door into the hall when she heard Boris Rank's footsteps head from the kitchen toward the main lab.

April took two rapid steps, reached the hall door and had pulled it open when she realized Rank was going to reach the door from the experimental kitchen before she could get into the hall and close the door behind her.

She spun her back to the door and shoved it closed behind her with an audible bang.

When Rank reached the door into the main lab, he found April coming toward him, just as though she had just entered from the hallway.

"Oh, there you are," he said. "I was looking for you."

"Tit for tat," she told him. "I just peeked in your office, but you weren't there."

"Oh? What did you want?"

"What did you want?" she countered.

"I feel in a celebrating mood," he said with a smile. "I was going to suggest we both take off early, have a couple of cocktails and then have dinner."

"It's my first day," she protested. "How would it look if I took off early?"

"I'm president of this company," he told her. "If it looks all right to me, why should you care how it looks to anyone else?"

She summoned a smile. "All right, boss, if it's an order. What time?"

"I'll run you over to the hotel at four, give you an hour to dress, and pick you up again at five."

"Sounds nice," she said. "See you at four."

When Rank had left again, April went into the experimental kitchen.

"I have to run an errand," she said. "Will you need me for a while?"

Shelia said, "The boss was looking for you."

"He found me. That's why I have to run an errand."

"Oh, sure," Shelia said. "Go ahead."

April went back into the main lab, found a pill box and packed her rhinestone ring in it, surrounded by cotton. She found some wrapping paper, wrapped the box and sealed it with scotch tape. She addressed the package to the post office box in New York City used as a cover mailing address by U.N.C.L.E.

Removing her lab smock, she left the building and hailed down a cruising taxicab.

"The nearest post office branch," she told the driver.

She had the taxi wait while she mailed the package and was back at the plant within fifteen minutes. After slipping her smock back on, she glanced into the experimental kitchen and found the two technicians engrossed in mixing a dough.

Retreating to a far corner of the main lab, she took out her communicator and called U.N.C.L.E. headquarters.

When Mr. Waverly answered, April said, "I managed to get into the special research lab, sir. I found notes of all the Elias woman's experiments with both the THRUSH drug which they can zero-seventeen, and Tehedrin zero fifty-five. I just mailed you a microfilm of them airmail."

"Good," Waverly said. "Did you get samples of the two drugs?"

"No, sir. Apparently she took the full supply of both to Pig Wallow with her."

"Well, the notes should serve as well," Waverly said. "Good work, Miss Dancer."

"Did you warn Mark that the Elias woman was en route there?" she asked.

"We can't reach him. He doesn't answer his communicator. We're continuing to try every fifteen minutes, however."

April asked anxiously, "Do you think he's in trouble, sir?"

"Unlikely. He seemed to be getting along famously at last report. I suspect he's left his communicator in his suitcase again, and simply hasn't heard the signal. We'll keep trying."

"Yes, sir," April said. "I hope you reach him before the Elias woman gets to Pig Wallow."

"Miss Dancer," Waverly said.

"Yes, sir."

"Something has been puzzling me. Why do you continuously refer

to this Miss Elias as the Elias woman?"

April was silent for a minute. Then she said, "Mark asked me that once too, sir. I guess it's because I'm a cat."

It was Waverly's turn to be silent. Finally he said, "I hope Mr. Slate understood that, Miss Dancer. I have to confess that I don't."

THIRTEEN
"TONIGHT YOU DIE!"

Before retiring Tuesday night, Mark Slate told Ma Rooney he wouldn't require an early breakfast the next morning. Since he had managed to take his limit of trout in mid-morning that day, he saw no point in getting up at the crack of dawn.

Wednesday he breakfasted with the four men. After breakfast Kurt Shill, Josef Donner and Rudolph Betz climbed the steep path up to the baking plant. Anton Radak announced that he was going fishing again with Slate.

Today, although it remained as warm as the previous day, the sky was dull and overcast. As they drove into the cemetery, Anton Radak looked up at it appraisingly.

"We may get wet," he said.

Slate cast an experienced weather eye upward. "Not this morning, I don't think. It may start coming down this afternoon."

But just in case his weather prediction proved inaccurate and they had to head for the jeep in a hurry, Slate put up the top of the jeep and put on the side curtains.

Today Anton Radak decided he wanted to try the section of stream Slate had fished yesterday, so Slate agreeably changed with him and began working upstream from the point where they parted company. As during the previous morning, Slate had his limit before noon. This time Radak managed to take two trout also.

As Slate had guessed, the rain held off all morning. It began to fall in large drops just as they got back to the boarding house. The three other men were already there, waiting for Ma Rooney to serve lunch.

During lunch it began to pour heavily.

"I guess this would settle things even if I hadn't already taken my limit," Slate said. "Looks like I spend another afternoon in bed."

"In that case I may as well go up to the plant this afternoon," Radak said. "When are you leaving, Mr. Slate?"

"After dinner, I think, providing this rain stops," Slate said. "With a nap, I won't mind driving all night."

He caught a relieved expression in Radak's eyes.

After lunch Slate watched from his bedroom window as the four men climbed up to the baking plant. They were all swathed in

raincoats and hats and wore galoshes on their feet. The rain had already reduced the path to mire.

As soon as the last of the four had disappeared into the building, Slate took a light raincoat from his suitcase and put it on. He used his fishing hat for a rain hat, not bothering to remove the trout flies from the band.

Quietly he descended the stairs. Again Ma Rooney was in the kitchen doing dishes. He slipped out the front door.

In the pouring rain he didn't think it was likely he could be seen clearly enough from the building on the mountainside to be identified, but since he could see the building clearly enough, he knew he could at least be seen from above. Since an observer might wonder why someone was going door-to-door in the village, he decided, for the first foray, to take the side of the street on which the boarding house was.

As the front doors of the houses on that side couldn't be seen from the baking plant, he would be under possible observation only when he went from one house to another.

A thin woman in her thirties came to the door at the first place he knocked. Examining his dripping figure without curiosity, she said, "Yes, sir?"

Slate looked her over carefully. She wore the same patient, uninterested expression the filling station attendant, the restaurant proprietor and the two old people in the combination drugstore ant general store had worn.

"Pinch your nose," Slate said.

The woman obediently pinched her nose, then merely stood waiting.

"Anyone else at home?" Slate asked.

"No, sir. My husband's out at the farm and the boy's in school.

"Thanks," Slate said, and turned away.

He found no one at all on that side of the street who wasn't under the influence of the drug. At the end of the street he looked into the one-room schoolhouse and found a young woman supervising the study of about two dozen youngsters of assorted ages. The teacher and the students all looked at him standing dripping in the doorway with the same blank, uninterested expressions he had become accustomed to.

There was no point in testing group. Running his gaze over the room, he failed to detect the slightest sign of curiosity in any of the faces. He turned around and waded through ankle-deep mud the opposite side of the street.

The church proved to be empty. He started checking the houses on that side of the street.

Visiting the houses on side of the street involved more risk being observed the baking plant, because he was now in constant view. It was a necessary however, if he was going to make a thorough canvass of the village.

Again he encountered no one who wasn't under the influence of the drug. By the time he reached the end of the street, he had come to the conclusion the two natives of Pig Wallow who weren't under the drug's influence were Ma Rooney and funeral director Myron Stoyle.

Ma Rooney's case was understandable because she didn't eat any of the products from the plant on the mountainside. But the director's immunity remained a puzzle.

He was contemplating returning to the parlor to question the man more closely about his dietary habits when he saw the door to the baking plant open. A raincoated figure emerged into the driving rain. From that distance he couldn't tell who it was, but the thickness of his body made it a choice between Anton Radak and stout Josef Donner.

The man wasn't looking his way, being intent on the slippery path before him. Slate slogged across the muddy street in order to place the houses on that side between himself and the man descending the path and sprinted for the boarding house.

He was visible from above whenever he crossed the open spaces between houses, but each time he his gaze fixed on the descending figure, and the man didn't once his glance his way. The path was too precarious for him to risk letting attention drift from where he was placing his feet.

Slate's shoes were coated an inch-thick with mud all over and his pant cuffs were dripping with it. On the porch he slipped out of his shoes and rolled up his cuffs a few inches.

The landlady was cleaning the living room when he stepped inside with his muddy shoes in his hand. She looked at the shoes in astonishment.

"Why, Mr. Slate," she said. "I thought you were in your room."

Slate was somewhat out of breath from running, but by heroic effort he managed to conceal it and make his voice come out without strain.

"Just walked up to the store for cigarettes," he said casually. "I won't get this mud on your carpets."

"Why'd you get off of the boardwalk?" Mrs. Rooney asked. "The drugstore's on this side."

"Slipped," Slate said briefly.

He went on by and up the stairs. The man coming down the path would be at least another five minutes getting to the bottom, he estimated. He went into the bathroom and held his shoes under the

cold water faucet until all the mud was washed away. Then he grabbed a dirty bath towel from the clothes hamper and went down the hall to his room.

He stripped off his raincoat and hung it over the door of his closet to drip dry, and hung his equally wet hat on the closet doorknob. He changed to dry slacks and draped the wet ones over a chair. Then he dried his shoes inside and out with the towel and put them back on.

By then the figure descending the path had reached the bottom and was starting across the back yard of the boarding house. Slate saw that it was Radak. Up above the door to the plant opened again and three more figures emerged.

Glancing at his watch, Slate saw that it was a quarter after four. He was mildly surprised that it had taken him three hours to canvass the town, but it still seemed too early for the plant to close down for the day. He wondered what was up that everyone was returning to the boarding house.

As Radak climbed up on the back porch, Slate slipped down the hall to the head of the stairs and listened. A minute or two passed, probably because Radak had pause on the back porch to removed his muddy galoshes, then he heard the man say, “Mr. Slate still in his room, Mrs. Rooney?”

“Yes,” the landlady said. To Slate’s relief she made no mention of him having been out of it.

“The others will be down in a few minutes,” Radak’s voice said.

“You’re closing the plant early today?” Ma Rooney asked.

“We’re expecting a visitor from our main plant. I got a phone call about it up above a while back. You won’t mind if we use your front room for a business meeting, will you?”

“No, of course not. I’ll be doing my upstairs cleaning anyway.”

Anton Radak, carrying his raincoat, appeared at the foot of the stairs and started upward. Slate faded back down the hallway to his own room and had eased the door closed before Radak reached the top of the stairs.

Inside his room Mark Slate mulled over the information that Radak expected a visitor from the main plant. Could it be Boris Rank or Dorcus Elias, or perhaps both? It would be disastrous if they found him here.

Mark couldn’t risk staying to find out who the expected visitor was. He decided to make a quick exit.

There was an old newspaper on the writing table by the window. He wrapped his wet slacks in a piece of it, his soaked fishing hat in another piece and stuffed them into his suitcase. It took only moments to throw the rest of his stuff into the suitcase and latch it. Then he shook the remaining drops of water from his raincoat and put it on.

As he carried the suitcase out into the hall, Anton Radak emerged from his room.

"Leaving, Mr. Slate?" the thickset man asked in surprise.

"I'm all rested up," Slate said easily, "I just decided to get an early start and catch my dinner in Barth."

It would have been normal for Radak to make some mention of the continuing downpour and suggest that it might be safer to wait until it stopped. But he was so obviously relieved at the prospect of the unwelcome visitor getting out from underfoot, he made no comment.

They went down the stairs together. Thin Kurt Shill, stout Josef Donner and young Rudolph Betz were just filing into the front room from the rear hall. All had left their galoshes on the back porch and were carrying their dripping raincoats.

"Mr. Slate is leaving," Radak announced,

This involved general good-bys and shaking hands all around. Slate paid Mrs. Rooney his board bill, told her good-by and was reaching for the front doorknob when the doorbell rang.

He paused with his hand still outstretched. Then, because there was nothing else he could do, he finished the motion and pulled open the door.

"Mark!" Dorcus Elias said in astonishment. "What are you doing here?"

The woman was dressed in a transparent raincoat with a parka-type hood. Behind her the rain came down in sheets and there was another curtained jeep parked behind Slate's.

"Dorcus!" Slate said with simulated enthusiasm. "How good to see you."

Setting down his suitcase, he took both her hands and drew her inside. She blushed flaming red when he tilted up her chin and kissed her solidly on the lips.

"Mark!" she protested. "In front of people! What *are* you doing here?"

"Little fishing vacation," he said.

"But I was just leaving and I have to get to Barth in a hurry. Nice seeing you again. I have to run."

Scooping up his suitcase, he went out and pulled the door closed behind him. But not before he heard Radak say, "How do you know that man?" and Dorcus reply, "He's a psychiatrist from Houston. We met–"

The rest was cut off by the closing door.

Slate was at the bottom of the porch steps when Anton Radak's cold voice said, "Mr. Slate."

Slate halted and slowly looked over his shoulder into the muzzle of a thirty-eight pistol.

"I think you had better rejoin us, Mr. Slate," Radak said frigidly. "We have some matters to discuss."

Slate turned and went back up the steps. Radak had left the door standing open. Slate went in and set down his suitcase. His short time in the rain had left his hair dripping. He shook his head and sent a fine spray in all directions.

Radak had followed Slate inside and had closed the door behind him. Ma Rooney was gazing at Radak's gun with her mouth open.

"What is this?" the landlady inquired in a high voice.

No one paid any attention to her. The four men were glowering at Slate. Dorcus' eyes were blazing at him.

"So, Dr. Mark Slate," she hissed.

"One day you are a psychiatrist from Houston, the next an auto salesman from Little Rock. What are you really? An U.N.C.L.E. agent?"

"What's U.N.C.L.E.?" Slate asked innocently.

Dorcus prowled toward him like a tigress. "You dare to mock me?" she shouted. "Do you think you had me fooled for a minute with your sweet talk? I knew what you were from the beginning. I merely played with you as a cat does with a mouse."

Slate told her amiably, "You must be nutty, miss. I don't catch the picture."

Dorcus turned pale with fury. "You are an U.N.C.L.E. agent! I should have known all along," she nearly squeaked. "You will die for this!"

"What's going on here?" Ma Rooney inquired loudly.

Dorcus turned her rage on the poor landlady. "Shut that woman up!" she yelled.

Young Rudolph Betz went over and took Ma Rooney's arm.

"Better come with me, Ma," he said. "You'll be safer."

He started to urge her toward the dining room door, but the landlady shook off his grip.

"I'll stay where I please in my own house," she said indignantly.

With a sigh of exasperation, young Betz drew a gun. "Get going, you old bag," he said, prodding her with it.

Betz pushed her on through the dining room and into the kitchen.

Dorcus swung on Anton Radak. "How much does he know?" she asked.

"Nothing from me," he said. "I have been with him every time he left the house. Otherwise he has stayed in his room."

"You think!" she blazed. "How do you know he hasn't sneaked out?"

"I don't," he admitted. "But what could he learn? I know he hasn't been up to the plant."

"You watched his room door all last night?" she asked sarcastically. "Why didn't you recognize him as a spy?"

"Why didn't you?" he countered.

Dorcus glared at him. Then she made an impatient gesture, took off her raincoat and tossed it over the back of the mohair sofa. She stooped to unzip transparent rain boots.

When she had kicked them off, she said, "Search him."

Radak continued to hold his gun on Slate while Kurt Shill searched him. First Slate was made to take off his raincoat.

When Shill had patted him all over, he stepped back and said, "He's clean."

Meantime stout Josef Donner had been examining Slate's suitcase.

"One broken fountain pen," he announced. "Plus this."

He held up an oddly shaped gun.

Mark shrugged. "You're getting warm," he said.

"If I didn't already know it, that would settle it," Dorcus said. "That's an U.N.C.L.E. gun." Then her eyes narrowed and she said slowly, "Something just occurred to me. April Dancer is an U.N.C.L.E. agent too, isn't she?"

"Who?" Slate said. "Oh, you mean that little girl we met at the convention." He chuckled wryly. "You're beginning to see U.N.C.L.E. behind every bush."

"I'm beginning to believe it is behind every bush," Dorcus said. She stared at him for a moment, then glanced around. "Does this place have a phone?"

"Over by the stairs," Radak said. Dorcus marched over to the phone and lifted it from its hook.

She said, "Operator, I wish to make a collect call to the Rank Baking Company in St. Louis." She gave the number.

There was a few moments' wait; then Dorcus said impatiently, "It's Dorcus, Marie. Quit asking questions and accept the call."

Apparently the plant switchboard operator did accept it, for after a pause, Dorcus said, "Ring the boss's office."

There was another pause, then,

"Helen? Put Boris on the line."

Dorcus listened, then said with barely controlled anger, "He left with Miss Dancer at four? Where in the devil did they go?"

She listened again, finally said, "Try his apartment, Helen. If he's not there, start phoning his regular hangouts. Start with the Chase, because that's where Miss Dancer is staying. Keep trying everywhere until you locate him, even if it takes half the night. Do you understand that? It's extremely important."

After another pause, Dorcus said, "Overtime, hell! You'll be out of a job tomorrow if you muff this. Get that through your dizzy blonde

head!"

Apparently Boris Rank's secretary was cowed, because Dorcus continued in a more moderate tone, "Have him call me at this number." She read the number from the phone dial. "Another thing. Don't under any circumstances let Miss Dancer know I'm trying to get in touch with Boris. If you reach her first, merely tell her to have him phone you, and that it's about a payroll matter or something. Understand?"

It seemed the girl did, for Dorcus grunted a good-by and hung up.

"Is there a basement in this place?" she asked Radak.

He nodded. "I have not been down there, but the door is off the back hall."

"Then let's get this U.N.C.L.E. agent and the landlady out of sight," Dorcus said. "Kurt, tell Rudy to bring that woman back here."

FOURTEEN

"STOW THE BLARNEY"

It was twenty minutes after four when Boris Rank dropped April off at her hotel. He told her he would be back to pick her up at five.

Twenty minutes later April Dancer had just turned off the shower in her bathroom when she heard the phone ringing. Wrapping a towel around her dripping body, she sped to answer it. It stopped ringing before she got there.

Probably it had been ringing for some time, she thought. It had rung only twice after she turned off the shower, but she would have been unable to hear prior rings over the sound of the cascading water.

It always mildly upset April to have a caller hang up before she could reach the phone. She called the hotel switchboard and asked the operator if she knew who had made the call. The girl said the call had been from outside the hotel, but otherwise she had no information about the caller.

"Was it a man or woman?" April persisted.

After a pause the operator said, "Sorry, ma'am, but I really don't know. There have been a dozen incoming calls for various rooms in the past few minutes, and I can't associate any particular voice with yours. The only reason I know it was an outside call was that I haven't had any house calls recently."

"Well, thanks anyway," April said, and hung up.

April tried to imagine who could have called. If Mr. Waverly wanted to contact her, he would have buzzed her communicator, Perhaps she had misplaced something at the lab, and Shelia Jennings or John Quade were trying to get in touch with her to find out what she had done with it.

Glancing at the traveler's alarm clock on her bedside stand, she saw that it was not yet a quarter to five. The lab would be open until five. Quickly she dried herself, slipped on a robe and phoned the Rank Baking Company.

"The laboratory, please," she told the switchboard operator.

Shelia Jennings answered.

"This is April Dancer," April said. "Did you or John just try to ring me at my hotel?"

"Not us," Shelia said. "Why?"

"I was in the shower and the phone stopped ringing before I could get to it. I thought it might be the lab, because I don't know anyone in town but you two."

"Sorry," Shelia said. "Maybe it was the big boss."

It probably had been Boris Rank, April decided. Perhaps he had phoned to tell her he was going to be late.

But exactly at five the desk phoned to say Rank was waiting for her in the lobby. She applied finishing touches to her makeup and joined him five minutes later.

Because she didn't know what sort of place Boris Rank planned to take her for dinner, she had chosen a black, backless cocktail dress suitable for any type of restaurant or night club. It was too warm an evening for a coat, so April carried only a light black feathered boa as a wrap.

Rank looked her over with admiration.

"Each new outfit I see you in, you look more beautiful," he said.

"Thank you," she said demurely. "Did you try to phone me a while ago?"

He looked blank. "Not I."

"The phone rang while I was in the shower," she explained. "I called the lab, but they hadn't phoned me. I don't know anyone else in town but you."

"Well, if it's important, they always call back," he said philosophically.

"I guess so," she said. "Are we going to have dinner here at the hotel?"

"It is no night out to dine at the same place you live," he told her. "I have a special treat in store for you."

He took her to a cocktail lounge on Delmar for a drink, then to Busch's Grove in the county northwest of St. Louis for dinner. At Busch's, in addition to an inside dining room, there were individual screened-in dining nooks spaced around the grounds, each just big enough for a single table. Boris Rank had reserved one of the dining nooks.

They had the house's drink specialty, a mint julep served in a sterling silver shell, before dinner, then a couple of delicious steaks. The atmosphere was so romantic, the food so good, April Dancers' escort so handsome and the julep so stimulating she found herself wistfully regretting that Boris Rank was an agent of U.N.C.L.E.'s dread enemy, THRUSH.

As they were having coffee their waiter appeared and said, "Mr. Rank?"

"Yes?" Rank said.

"You're wanted on the phone, sir."

Rank looked surprised. "You're sure it's for me? Nobody knows I'm here."

"The lady said Mr. Boris Rank, sir."

Rank frowned slightly, his expression suggesting he felt the waiter could have been more discreet than to disclose the call was from a lady when he was dining with another lady.

"Excuse me," he said to April, rising from his chair.

"Of course," she said.

Rank was gone about twenty minutes. When he returned, he apologized profusely.

"It was my secretary," he said.

"You remember Helen. You met her at my office."

"Yes," April Dancer said. "The blonde."

"She has been phoning for me all over town, and finally tried here because she knows it is one of my favorite spots. It was she who tried to phone you, incidentally. She was trying to get in touch with me."

"Oh," April said. "It's a relief to have that mystery solved. Anything serious?"

"Not now. One of our accountants was having a conniption fit over a check I was supposed to have deposited a week ago. I phoned him at the plant, explained that it was in my safe and promised to take care of it first thing in the morning."

"I'm glad that's all it was," April said. "Your coffee is cold. Do you want some more?"

He shook his head. "Let's get out of here."

As they drove off the parking lot, Rank said, "I planned to take you dancing after dinner, but it's early yet, so we're going to do something else first. How would you like a bird's eye view of St. Louis lights?"

April looked at him with raised eyebrows. "What do you mean?"

"The airport isn't far from here. I have a helicopter."

April thought of her plane hop from St. Louis to Barth and remembered her headache.

"Light planes tend to give me a headache," she said, a little dubiously.

"We won't be up long. And we can pick up some aspirin at the airport. "

"All right," she agreed. "Are you a competent pilot?"

It really didn't matter, because April could fly a helicopter herself, but in her role of defenseless womanhood she thought she ought to ask the question.

Rank laughed. "I don't fly at all. But don't worry about it. I have a professional pilot, and he lives quite near the airport. I phoned him while I was away from the table. He will be there before we are."

There was a drugstore at the airport. Rank bought a box of twelve aspirins and handed it to April. She dropped it into her purse.

When they reached the hanger where Boris Rank kept his helicopter, they found that it had already been wheeled out. A stocky

pug-nosed man in his mid-thirties stood next to it. He was dressed in coveralls and a flying cap with goggles.

Rank introduced the pilot as Chance Matt.

"Won't I be cold in these clothes?" April asked, looking at the pilot's coveralls.

"No, ma'am," Chance Matt said.

"Inside the bubble it will be as warm as toast."

April doubted that, having been up in helicopters before. It could get quite chilly at a thousand feet. But perhaps this one was equipped with a heater, she thought.

They all climbed into the cabin, Mott closed the sliding door, started the rotor turning and they lifted from the ground. The helicopter rose to about a thousand feet, then swung out over the city.

While it was still warm enough in the cabin, April knew from experience that if they remained at that height very long, cold would begin to seep inside. She glanced around for some sign of a heater and failed to spot any. Well, they wouldn't be up long enough for it to get very uncomfortable, she thought.

"The new monument overlooking the riverfront parkway development," Rank said, pointing to a huge lighted arch to the east.

April emitted an appreciative murmur.

It was a clear night and the lights of the city below them glowed brightly. Boris Rank continued to point out individual patterns of light and explain what they were.

The airport was at the extreme north end of the city. When they reached its southern limits and the lights below began to appear farther apart, April realized they were continuing on south of the city.

"Where are we going now?" she asked.

"Just for a ride," Boris Rank explained.

The helicopter picked up speed and the lights of the city continued to recede.

"It's beginning to get chilly," April said. "Ask him to turn back."

Rank lifted her feathered boa from her lap and draped it around her shoulders. "This will keep you warm."

"But I'm also getting a headache," April said. "Mr. Mott, please turn around."

The pilot made no answer. Rank plucked April's purse from her lap, opened it and took out the aspirin he had bought her. Pulling a thermos bottle from beneath his seat, he poured a cup of water, handed it to her and proffered the open box of aspirin.

April frowned at him, but he was smiling so pleasantly, she temporarily held back the tart comment that rose to her lips. She accepted two aspirin and downed them with the water.

Rank snapped the aspirin box closed, dropped it back in her purse

and took the cup from her hand. He shook the few remaining drops of water on the floor, screwed the cap back on and shoved the bottle back under his seat. Instead of returning April's purse, he dropped it on the seat alongside of him on the opposite side from April.

"May I have my purse back please?" she said.

"Why?" he asked pleasantly. "So you can use one of the clever devices in it to make us turn back?"

April stared at him. Almost casually he drew a thirty-eight automatic from beneath his arm and pointed it at her.

"What is this?" April said.

"It should be obvious that you have been uncovered as an agent of U.N.C.L.E.," he said in the same pleasant tone. "It is too bad. I really was becoming quite interested in you."

April stared at the gun for a moment, then made her voice seductively husky. "I was becoming quite interested in you too, Boris. It started just as another assignment, but they never warned me at U.N.C.L.E. academy that things could happen to a girl's heart. Why do we have to be on opposite sides?"

His expression became slightly pained. "I only permit the same woman to make a fool of me once, little girl from U.N.C.L.E. You're from New England originally, aren't you?"

"Yes," she admitted.

"Well, in the language of your seafaring ancestors, stow the blarney."

April stuck out her tongue at him. Boris Rank laughed with sardonic good humor.

"That's what I thought you thought of me," he said. "You U.N.C.L.E. people are too dedicated to have any personal emotions."

April fell silent, thinking furiously. She wondered if the pilot knew what he was involved in, or was just a paid employee of Rank. Perhaps she could enlist his aid if she could get across to him that his employer was an agent of the world's most heinous organization.

The girl from U.N.C.L.E said, "Do you know who you're working for, Chance?"

"Yes, ma'am," he said politely, the first words he had uttered since they became airborne. "THRUSH."

FIFTEEN

WINGS OF THE LOST

The cabin was now becoming uncomfortably chilly. When they had flown south for some time, April asked, “Where are you taking me?”

“You will know when we get there,” Rank said. “Sit still and shut up.”

April wrapped the feather boa more closely around her bare shoulders, sat still and was quiet.

The sky became more overcast the farther south they got, and finally light drops of rain appeared on the Plexiglas bubble. It was now chilly enough in the cabin to make April shiver.

They had flown into a steady but light drizzle and were over an area where there were only a few dim, widely spaced lights below when a bright circle of flares appeared in the distance. The pilot changed direction and headed for the flares.

Periodically the circle of flares disappeared and the pilot would climb until they became visible again, then make a change of course and drop back to the original height. April realized that this phenomenon was due to mountains getting between them and the flares, and that they must be deep in the Ozark Mountains. She had guessed all along that they were heading for Pig Wallow, but now she was sure of it.

Finally they were directly above the circle of flares. When the helicopter descended to the exact center of the circle, April saw that it was about fifty feet in diameter and that the flares forming its perimeter were spaced about six feet apart.

A rain coated figure was waiting just outside the circle, and beyond it April could dimly make out a number of tombstones. They were in the cemetery just outside of Pig Wallow, she realized.

Chance Mott cut the engine and slid open the door. The air outside was somewhat warmer than it had M.S.been at a thousand feet, but it was still too chilly for comfort.

The rain coated figure approached. By the light of the flares April saw that it was Dorcus Elias in a raincoat and rain boots. Her arms were loaded with raincoats and galoshes.

“Have any trouble?” she asked Rank.

“Not a bit. This is awful weather you’re having.”

“You should have seen it a few hours ago,” Dorcus said. “I thought

it was the second deluge. I had to drive through it all the way from Barth. This is just a heavy dew now."

She handed the raincoats and galoshes up to the pilot. After looking them over, he tossed a raincoat and a pair of galoshes to April. The raincoat looked familiar. The cabin lights were still on, and by their glow she examined the initials on the inside of the collar. They were *M.S*.

So Mark Slate had been taken too, she thought. She slipped on the raincoat, then stooped to pull on the galoshes. They were women's boots, but they were sizes too large.

"Sorry I couldn't bring you a better fit, dearie," Dorcus said ironically. "I could have brought you a woman's coat, but it was twice the size of that one."

Boris Rank continued to hold his gun on April until the pilot had donned a raincoat and galoshes. Then Chance Mott covered her while Rank put on his.

Rank jumped down to the ground first and helped April down. When the pilot had switched out the cabin lights and had joined them, Rank handed April's purse to Dorcus. The woman opened it and examined its contents by the light of the flares.

"No obvious weapons," she said.

"But it's probably full of U.N.C.L.E. gadgets. We'll look them over later. Did you search her?"

"She couldn't conceal a weapon in the outfit she's wearing," Rank said.

Dorcus led them over to a curtained jeep parked on the graveled drive leading into the cemetery. April shuffled along in her oversized boots, her raincoat coming nearly to her ankles.

Dorcus told the two men to sit in back, slid under the wheel and ordered April to sit in front next to her. She tossed April's purse on the floor in back. Chance Mott continued to hold a gun on April.

"What about the flares?" Boris Rank asked.

"They'll burn out," Dorcus said. She started the engine and put the car in gear. The graveled drive gave good traction to the jeep's tires, but the moment they pulled off of it onto the dirt road, they were in six inches of fluid mud. No ordinary automobile could have gone a dozen feet without becoming hopelessly mired, but the jeep plowed right through it.

Their destination was the boarding house the natives referred to as "Ma Rooney's place." There was another curtained jeep parked in front of it.

Dorcus led the way up onto the front porch and Chance Mott prodded April after her with his gun. Rank brought up the rear.

Kurt Shill, the thin, brittle-looking man, sat in the front room. He

looked at April curiously, nodded to Rank and the pilot and said, “Evening, Boris, Chance. Still raining?”

The pilot raised one hand in a lazy salute and said, “Hi, Kurt. Just drizzling. “

Boris Rank said, “Where’s Anton and the others?”

The thin man said, “They are all down in the cellar watching the prisoners.”

“Prisoners?” Rank said with a glance at Dorcus. “Is there more than one?”

“We had to tie up the landlady too,” Dorcus said. “She’s not under the influence of Z-seventeen. Those are her boots the Dancer woman is wearing.”

Tit for tat, April thought. The Elias woman was a cat too.

Dorcus stripped off her raincoat, tossed it over the back of a mohair sofa before an empty fireplace, and stooped to unzip her rain boots. When the two men started to take off their raincoats and boots, April followed suit.

Dorcus examined April’s black cocktail dress and feathered boa sourly, then sniffed.

“Follow me,” Dorcus ordered, and led the way down a rear hall running alongside the staircase to the second floor.

Again the pilot followed April, keeping her covered with his gun, and Rank brought up the rear. The thin Kurt remained in the front room. Halfway down the hall Dorcus opened a door. They went down a flight of stairs into a lighted basement.

It was a full basement, one large room beneath the whole house. Centered against the side wall opposite the stairs was a furnace and a water heater. To one side of them was an electric water pump, presumably for a deep well, as the village had no centralized water supply system. Along the rear wall were two set tubs and an old-fashioned washing machine with a wringer.

Mark Slate and a plump blonde woman in her fifties were tied hand-and-foot to a couple of straight-back chairs. April assumed the woman was the landlady, Ma Rooney. Seated on the only other chair in the basement was a thickset, beetle-browed man April recognized from the mugg shots in his dossier as Anton Radak. A stout man of about thirty and a red-haired man in his twenties sat on overturned boxes.

Anton Radak looked at April and said, “You nabbed her, eh?”

No one replied to the obvious comment. April examined Mark Slate for signs of physical damage and got a reassuring smile.

Dorcus said curtly, “Tie her up.”

Anton Radak rose from his chair and moved it over next to Mark Slate’s. Without waiting to be told, April sat in it and glanced sidewise

at Slate.

"How did you get caught? She asked.

"I ran smack into Dorcus just as I was taking a powder," he said. "She guessed about you and made a phone call."

April said, "Mr. Waverly has been trying to contact you since noon to warn you Dorcus was coming here. Why don't you answer your communicator?"

"It's broken."

The young redheaded man had gone over to a bench against one wall. He returned with a roll of clothesline and proceeded to bind April to her chair. He did a thorough job, tying her wrists in front of her, her ankles, then binding her to the chair both at the ankles and with rope looped around her upper body.

When this was completed, Boris Rank said crisply to Dorcus, "What now?"

"Well have to revise our plans completely," she said. "We can't continue our experiment here, now that U.N.C.L.E. knows of it. We'll have to find some other remote town to test the revised version of the drug."

"What about the plant here?" Rank asked.

"We can't leave all the baked goods for U.N.C.L.E. to get hold of and analyze. And we haven't time to get trucks in here to pull everything out. We'll have to destroy everything."

Rank frowned. "You mean burn the place down?"

"What else can we do?" Dorcus said. "By tomorrow U.N.C.L.E. agents will probably be pouring into Pig Wallow. We can salvage the Z-seventeen which hasn't already been mixed with dough and take it with us, but we'll have to write everything else off."

She turned to Anton Radak. "Anton, take Rudy with you up to the plant and bring down the whole supply of Z-seventeen."

Radak nodded, but the young redhead lodged a protest. "That path is knee-deep in mud," he said.

"Then you'll have to wade through knee-deep mud," Dorcus snapped at him. "Do as you're told!"

The young man's face assumed a sullen expression, but he made no further objection.

Dorcus turned back to Radak.

"I want you to bring down a couple of other things too. Some of that special Danish pastry, for one."

Radak glanced at April and Slate and an anticipatory smile curled his lips. "All right. What else?"

"That fire bomb in the lab." Radak frowned. "Why don't I just set it while I'm up there? Why lug it down here?"

"Because I told you to," Dorcus told him curtly.

The thickset man shrugged. “Come on, Rudy,” he said, and started up the stairs.

The younger man followed sullenly.

Dorcus said to Boris Rank, “They will be some time. No point in staying down here.” She turned to the stout man and said, “Keep, an eye on them, Josef. We’ll be right upstairs and we’ll leave the door open. If you need us, just yell.”

“Sure,” he said. “But I won’t need you. If they try to wiggle loose, I’ll get in some target practice.”

His hand dipped into his pocket and came out with a spring-blade knife. There was a click and a seven-inch blade jumped into view. The stout man’s hand made a blurred motion, there was a thunk and the point of the blade buried itself in the edge of the chair seat between Mark Slate’s knees.

He went over to retrieve it, clicked the knife shut and dropped it back into his pocket.

Dorcus said coldly, “That’s enough target practice unless they try to make a break. If you had missed and put that in his stomach, I would have your skin. I have other plans for those two.”

“I never miss,” the stout man said confidently. “I can skewer a fly at ten paces.”

“Well, hold your demonstrations until they’re needed,” Dorcus said.

She turned and started up the stairs. Rank and Chance Matt followed. The stout man resumed his seat on his box, took out his knife, clicked it open and began tossing it into the air and catching it again.

Slate said to April, “Our fellow captive is Ma Rooney, April. She’s one of the only two natives of Pig Wallow not under the influence of the drug.”

April craned her neck to look past Slate at the landlady.

“How do you do?” she said politely.

“Not so hot, miss,” Ma Rooney said. “Mr. Slate told me all about you while we’ve been sitting here tied up for hours. Also about the drug they’ve been feeding the villagers. I knew it wasn’t no heat exhaustion.”

April looked puzzled.

Slate, catching her expression” said, “They don’t have any doctors in Pig Wallow. Only a vet, and I guess he’s under the influence of the drug too. He has been diagnosing the cause of all these deaths as heat exhaustion.”

“At this time of year?”

“Well, there has been a hot spell. Incidentally, fatty over there playing with the knife is Josef Donner.”

Josef Donner ignored both of them. He resumed flipping the knife and catching it.

Slate said to April, “You recognized Anton Radak, I imagine. The young redhead is Rudolph Betz. There’s another skinny guy around somewhere named Kurt Shill.”

“I saw him upstairs,” April said.

“That fellow in the coveralls is Boris’ helicopter pilot. He’s named Chance Matt.”

Ma Rooney asked, “What do you think they’ll do to us?”

Neither Slate nor April answered. Josef Donner emitted a little giggle.

“The same thing we’re going to do to the bake plant,” he said.

Ma Rooney turned pale.

SIXTEEN

PASSPORT TO PERIL

After a time Dorcus and Boris Rank came back down the stairs, with five of the other men following. Anton Radak was carrying a large, cellophane wrapped Danish pastry. The redheaded Rudolph Betz carried a small, boxlike device.

Josef Donner put away his knife when he heard the group coming down the stairs, but Dorcus immediately had him take it out again.

Taking the pastry from Radak and handing it to the stout man, she said, "We have a practical use for that toy of yours, Josef. Cut this up into portions."

Donner emitted another giggle and threw a look at the three bound prisoners. "That's the really loaded stuff, isn't it?" he said. "Guaranteed quick action. Sure, I'll be glad to cut it."

Getting up from his box, he ripped away the cellophane and laid the pastry on the box. He took out his knife and sliced the confection evenly into a dozen slim wedges.

"Make them eat it," Dorcus ordered Anton Radak.

The thickset man picked up a wedge, went over to Mark Slate and held it to his lips.

"No thanks," Slate said politely.

"I never eat Danish."

Stout Josef Donner went over to April, flicked her long hair aside with his knife blade and rested the blade on top of her right ear. He said, "If it isn't down in ten seconds, your girl friend is going to lose an ear."

Slate grabbed at the pastry like a snapping turtle. Radak fed it to him as he chewed rapidly and swallowed.

Donner withdrew the knife and stepped aside as Radak carried a piece over to April. Donner changed places with him and rested his knife blade on top of Slate's right ear.

April glanced sidewise at the poised knife, gulped and opened her mouth. Radak fed the pastry to her until it was all gone.

Ma Rooney made no protest when it came her turn. When Donner stood to one side of her, flipping the knife and catching it, she resignedly chewed and swallowed the piece Radak fed her.

Radak picked up the fourth piece and approached Mark Slate.

"It's too dry," Slate protested. "Nobody eats that stuff without coffee."

Radak paused.

"That's reasonable," he said.

"But this is no restaurant. Rudy, go get some water."

Instead of going upstairs for it, the redhead went over to an open cabinet containing home canned goods and found an empty jelly glass. He filled it at one of the set tubs and brought it over to hold to Slate's lips. Slate took a swallow.

Betz held the glass to April's lips. She started to shake her head, then decided she was going to be forced to eat more of the pastry anyway, so she might as well ease the ordeal as much as possible. She drank about a quarter of the glass.

When Betz carried it over to Ma Rooney, she finished off the rest of the water.

"Want more?" he asked.

The landlady shook her head. Radak held Slate's second portion of pastry to his lips again. When Slate failed to open his mouth instantly, Josef Donner started toward April. With an expression of resignation on his face, Slate ate the pastry.

There were three pieces left, but Dorcus decided that would be enough. "It should take at least a half hour to get to them," she said. "What time is it?"

Boris Rank glanced at a watch and said, "Eleven-thirty."

"Then let's go upstairs and get our stuff ready to move out. I never unpacked, but you four have to pack, don't you?" She glanced around at Radak, Shill, Donner and Betz ..

They all admitted they had some packing to do.

"Run do it now and carry everything down into the front room so there will be no delay when we're ready to leave," Dorcus ordered. "Chance, you keep guard down here."

"Yes, ma'am," the pilot said.

The rest of them started upstairs. As they went up the stairs, April heard Dorcus say to Rank, "We'll take both my jeep and the one Slate brought. With all the luggage it will be crowded, but only as far as the cemetery. I'll ride back in the copter with you and Chance, so there will only be two to a jeep beyond there."

Chance Matt sat down on one of the boxes and gazed at the prisoners.

Ma Rooney said shakily, "Do you think they gave us fatal overdoses of that stuff?"

Slate looked at the helicopter pilot. "Did they?"

"Naw," he said. "You couldn't eat enough at one sitting. It's cumulative, see. It takes a steady diet for days or weeks to knock anybody off."

That was some slight consolation, April thought.

Matt added, “You got depth bombed, though. That’s a special treat we foist off on people who don’t respond on a regular diet. It’s got three times the ordinary dose in it.”

Conversation lapsed for some minutes. Finally April said, “How do you feel, Mark?”

“Odd,” he said. “Just the way I did when it happened before.”

“So do I,” she said. “It’s hard to explain the exact feeling. It’s just odd.”

Ma Rooney said, “It’s like something bad is getting ready to happen to you, but you don’t care an awful lot.”

“It’s getting to you,” Chance Matt said cheerfully. “Another few minutes and you won’t give a damn about anything.”

At midnight Dorcus and Rank came back downstairs. All three prisoners looked up at Dorcus when she stopped before them, but they didn’t regard her with any particular interest. Their faces merely wore polite, waiting expressions.

Dorcus said, “Stick out your tongues.”

Three tongues obediently shot out.

“Touch your noses with your tongues.”

They all tried, but none could quite make it. Their expressions became worried at their failure.

“You may pull in your tongues,” Dorcus told them.

The three tongues disappeared. Dorcus said to Rank, “Do you notice how it worries subjects when they receive an impossible order? It’s the only sign of emotion they ever exhibit. It would be interesting to run some experiments to find out if we can drive patients crazy by giving them some impossible order, such as touching their ears with their tongues, then never rescinding the order.”

“Why don’t we try it with these three?” Rank suggested.

“Because I have other plans for them. Besides, we want to get out of here.” She moved over to April and began untying her bonds. “Chance, you and Boris untie the other two. They can’t give us any trouble now.”

Rank untied Mark Slate while the pilot released Ma Rooney. When all three were free, Dorcus picked up the small boxlike device which young Rudolph Betz had brought from the plant.

“Let’s go upstairs,” she said.

The other men were all in the front room. A pile of suitcases lay near the front door. Raincoats were piled on the sofa, ready to put on, and four pair of galoshes in addition to Dorcus’ and Ma Rooney’s lay on the floor. Two of the pairs, presumably those worn by Radak and Betz when they climbed the path up to the bakery plant earlier, were covered with drying mud.

Dorcus held the boxlike device in one hand, its front side tilted

upward so that she could see the clock-like dial on its face. She adjusted the single hand so that it stood nearly straight up.

"What are you setting it for?" Rank asked.

"Two seconds." Dorcus showed the device to Slate, and said, "I want you to carry this up to the baking plant and set it beneath the building. The front end is raised on stilts, you know, So that you can walk right under it."

"Yes, ma'am," Mark Slate said dully.

"I want you to set it down right under the center of the building. Understand?"

"Yes, ma'am," Slate said in the same dull voice, reaching for the device.

Dorcus pulled it beyond his reach. "Not yet. I have more instructions. "

Slate's arms dropped to his sides. He waited patiently.

"Do you see this small plunger on top?" Dorcus said, touching it lightly.

"Yes, ma'am."

"After you set the box down, pull the plunger all the way up, then shove it down again. Understand?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Just to make sure, repeat all my instructions."

In a tone of complete uninterest Slate said. "I am to carry the box up to the bakery plant and set it down under the very center of the building. Then I am to pull out that plunger and shove it down again."

"You've got it," Dorcus said, handing him the box. She turned to April and Ma Rooney. "Did you both hear my instructions to Mark Slate?"

In identically dull voices they said, "Yes, ma'am."

"You two are to go up to the plant with him. You are to stand either side of him, quite close, when he pushes the plunger. Understand?"

Again they both said, "Yes, ma'am."

"Won't they need raincoats and boots?" Rank asked.

"What for?" Dorcus inquired callously. "If they get wet, the fire will dry them out."

"She will never be able to climb that slippery path in those high heels," Radak objected, jerking a thumb at April. "Rudy and I barely made it up there wearing boots."

Rank said, "It is silly not to equip them so that they can carry out their orders. Suppose Slate slips and falls and loses the bomb in the mud?"

Dorcus bit her lip undecidedly, then stooped to pick her own rain boots from the floor and handed them to April. "Our feet are about

the same size," she said. "Put these on."

As April obediently sat in a chair and slipped on the boots, Dorcus tossed the large woman's galoshes April had worn earlier to Ma Rooney and ordered her to put them on.

Then she glanced at Slate's feet and from them to the feet of the other men.

"Your feet are about the same size as Slate's, Rudy," she told the young redhead. "Give him your boots."

Sullenly Rudolph Betz picked up one of the mud caked pairs of galoshes and tossed them to Slate.

"Are you going to let them put on raincoats too?" Rank asked.

"I have no intention of giving the girl mine," Dorcus said haughtily. "You'll want to wear Slate's, and I was going to let Chance wear Mrs. Rooney's. You and Chance can be generous if you want to."

Neither decided the comfort of the prisoners was as important as their own. When the three were properly booted, Dorcus led them along the hall next to the stairs to the back door, uncoated. The rest of the group trailed after them.

Opening the rear door, Dorcus led them on out onto the back porch. All six of the THRUSH men crowded out onto it also.

"It has stopped raining," Dorcus said in a disappointed tone.

Boris Rank laughed. "She's going to be dead in a few minutes, Dorcus. What difference does it make if her hair doesn't get all wet and stringy first?"

"How do you know what I was thinking?" she flared at him.

"Because I know you," Rank said indulgently.

Dorcus swung to the three prisoners. "All right, start on up," she snapped. "And remember everything I told you."

There was a chorused, "Yes, ma'am," from the trio.

They went down the porch steps and plodded across the back yard in single file, Slate in the lead, then April, then Ma Rooney.

Although the drizzling rain had stopped, the air was now even chillier than it had been when the helicopter landed.

April Dancer drew her feathered boa closely around her bare shoulders. Ma Rooney, wearing only a thin housedress, hugged herself. Even Mark Slate, in shirt sleeves, shivered slightly.

The back yard was mown grass, which, though soggy, was firm enough to keep their feet from sinking into the ground. The moment they started up the mountainside path, however, their feet sank in mud to the ankles.

It was slow going. Slate, holding the boxlike device in both hands, plodded ahead, placing each foot carefully. His boots made a sucking noise each time he drew them from the mud to take another step forward. April's progress was a little easier, because she carefully

stepped into Slate's footprints before the mud had a chance to fill the holes completely again. Ma Rooney in turn stepped in April's tracks.

Down below all seven THRUSH agents stood on the back porch watching. Part of the time they could see very little because of the blackness of the night. But the overhead clouds were drifting, and occasionally the moon peeked through a hole, sending a ray like a spotlight onto the three climbing the path.

The path led to an entrance at the near side of the building, then around its front, past the timbers supporting it, to another door on the far side. Halfway between the two ends of the building Mark Slate stepped off the path and walked under the building. April and Ma Rooney followed.

The supporting timbers were about ten feet high, and the ground slanted upward to where the rear edge of the building rested on solid ground. It was bone dry under here, and also pitch black.

April said, "Mark."

Slate had reached a point about a third of the way to the rear and his head had brushed the underside of the floor above. He had started to stoop so that he could go farther beneath the building when April spoke.

Pausing, he said in docile manner, "Yes, ma'am."

"Orders are changed," April said crisply. "Give me that box."

She had no idea what caused her immunity to the drug, but as on the previous occasion, she had been totally unaffected. She had merely assumed the dull facial expression and mannerisms of one under the drug's influence.

Slate obediently handed her the device.

"Follow me, both of you," April ordered, and moved quickly to the far side of the building, beneath the steps going up on that side.

A shaft of moonlight broke through the drifting clouds at that moment. By its light April studied the clock face and changed the single hand to make the setting thirty seconds instead of two.

Dorcus had referred to the device as a fire bomb, which probably meant it was a phosphorus bomb. Anyone standing close to such a bomb when it exploded would be instantly seared to death by flaming phosphorus, but the lethal range of such a device was not great. Thirty seconds should allow her time to get beyond its range.

The bomb would have to be exploded, of course. If it failed to go off, the people below would come to investigate. And there was nowhere to hide on the mountainside.

April ran her gaze along the mountainside beyond the building. Another momentary shaft of moon light showed her an outcropping of rock about fifty feet away. Just beyond it was a flat ledge which looked as though it continued back behind the outcropping.

The moon ray held long enough for April to point and say, “Mark, Mrs. Rooney, see where that rock juts out?”

“Yes, ma’am,” they both said. “Get over there and get behind it on that ledge. Hurry now!”

Both obediently began to crawl along the mountainside. There was no path to follow here, but this actually made it easier going because scrub grass made the ground firmer and there were small shrubs to furnish handholds.

When April saw that they were well on their way, she ran back beneath the building to its very center and set down the fire bomb. She lifted the plunger all the way up and drove it home again. Running back to the edge of the building, she began to scramble toward the outcropping of rock.

Another shaft of moonlight showed her that both Slate and Ma Rooney had reached the ledge beyond the rock and were just stepping behind the rock. Fortunately they couldn’t be seen by the group below on the back porch of the boarding house, because the baking plant obstructed the view from there.

Halfway to the outcropping of rock April’s booted left foot slid out from under her on a damp rock. As she started to slide on her stomach down the slope, she grabbed frantically at a small shrub. She managed to get hold of it with both hands, arresting her downward progress, but she could feel it slowly coming out by the roots.

Releasing her right hand from the shrub, but continuing to hang on with her left, she wound the fingers of her free hand into a tuft of tough scrub grass. Pulling herself upward, she managed to get her knees beneath her just as the shrub tore loose. But now, merely using her grip on the scrub grass to maintain balance instead of to support her weight, the grass held.

She pulled herself to her feet and inched toward the jutting rock again.

The delay had consumed too much time, she thought with her heart in her throat. Thirty seconds must be nearly up, and she still had half the distance to cover.

If the bomb went off before she reached the protection of the outcropping of rock, she was certain to be impaled by streams of burning phosphorus.

The girl from U.N.C.L.E. had the incongruous thought that a lady should be at her prettiest at the moment of death, and her cocktail dress was ruined.

Expecting the blast at each despairing moment, she clutched at scrub grass, shrubs, jutting rocks, anything offering a handhold as she continued to inch along the steep slope. Incredibly the bomb still hadn’t exploded when her hands gripped the rim of the ledge behind

the rock.

April was still in the open, though, below the ledge, when a low rumbling noise came from beneath the building.

Thrusting up one hand, she said, “Mark! Pull me up!”

His strong hand gripped her wrist and jerked her behind the protection of the rock just as the whole area was lighted by a blinding white flash. The flash was accompanied by a tremendous whooshing noise which must have rattled every window in the village. Streams of white-hot phosphorus streaked by the outcropping of rock behind which April, Slate and Ma Rooney crouched, some sizzling against the other side of the rock.

The white glow faded to be replaced by one of bright red as the building burst into flame. The conflagration was so sudden and so complete that its heat seared the air around them. Only the shielding rock kept them from being roasted alive.

“Follow me,” April commanded, and began scrambling along the mountainside away from the fire.

She kept glancing over her shoulder, partly to make sure Slate and Ma Rooney were all right, partly to make sure she was keeping the outcropping of rock between them and the fire. Since the outcropping was only fifty feet from the inferno, the air above and below it was searing hot. But extending out from it was a narrow channel of cooler air, and April wanted to be sure to stay in this. In order to stay in it, they had to climb at a slightly downward angle.

A hundred feet from the flaming building they came to a vertical gash in the side of the mountain. When they had all scrambled over the edge of the gash, April looked down. They were in a sort of flue, six feet across and about three feet deep which ran clear to the foot of the mountain and came out in back of the combination drugstore and general store.

April also noted with some surprise that people were pouring from the houses both sides of the street to stand on the boardwalks and gape up at the spectacular fire. Apparently even Z-17 couldn’t quell the natural fascination fire held for people.

April Dancer peered over the rim of the flue back toward the boarding house. They were now far enough beyond the burning building so that it no longer blocked the view, and by the light of the fire she could see the seven THRUSH people still standing on the back porch staring upward. Seemingly none of them had seen Mark, Ma Rooney and April working their ways along the mountainside, for no one was looking their way. They were all too intent on the fire.

“Let’s go,” April said to Slate and Ma Rooney, and began to crawl backward down the flue.

At the bottom of the slope she glanced toward the boarding house

and saw that all of the people on the back porch still had eyes for nothing but the fire. Motioning her companions to follow, April Dancer ran for the protection of the far side of the drugstore-general store.

When they were all safely around the corner, April peered back around the end of the building to make sure they hadn't been spotted. No one on the back porch of the boarding house was looking their way.

April drew back her head and examined her torn and muddy cocktail dress. As she had suspected, it was totally ruined. Her hands were covered with mud and she suspected her face was too. Somehow she had managed to retain her feathered boa through it all.

She used it to wipe off her hands, then looked at Mark Slate and Ma Rooney. Both were in equally bedraggled states.

"Follow me," April said, and headed alongside the drugstore to the street.

The boardwalks on both sides of the street were packed with people, most of them in robes over nightclothes, all staring up at the fire on the mountainside. The entire population of the village seemed to have been routed from bed, for even small children were in the crowd.

April grasped Slate's hand and told him to take Ma Rooney's. In chain fashion they weaved in and out of the crowd, none of which paid them any particular attention, toward the two jeeps parked in front of the boarding house.

When they reached the first one, April released Slate's hand and pulled open the curtained front door. After a glance inside, she whirled to face Slate.

"The key!" she said. "Do you have it?"

He dipped a muddy hand into his trouser pocket and brought out a key. Taking it from him, April jerked open the jeep's rear door.

"In back, both of you," she commanded.

The pair obediently climbed in back. April slammed the door, started to get in front, then changed her mind and pushed her way through the crowd blocking the sidewalk to the jeep behind them. Grabbing her purse from the floor of the rear seat, she started to shove her way back through the crowd to the other jeep.

She glanced quickly over her shoulder as she pulled open the front door. Dorcus and the six THRUSH men were streaming from the boarding house onto the front porch, four of them carrying suitcases.

They all spotted April simultaneously. The four suitcases crashed to the floor of the porch. Dorcus dipped her hand into her purse and came out with a small pearl-handled automatic. Six other guns came from beneath the men's coats.

SEVENTEEN

EVERYBODY SINGS

April Dancer jumped into the jeep and slammed the door behind her. When no shots came, she realized it was because the crowd on the boardwalk was in the line of fire.

The Girl from U.N.C.L.E. thrust the key into the ignition, started the engine and shifted into low-low and four-wheel drive. She began to make a U-turn. Because of the deep mud, the jeep moved at a snail's pace.

Glancing over her shoulder, she saw that the THRUSH people on the porch were not attempting to push their ways through the crowd. They were merely standing there, guns at the ready. April realized they were simply waiting for the jeep to get far enough away from the boardwalk on this side to give them a clear target.

She foiled that plan by halting the jeep as soon as it had turned completely sidewise, cramping the wheels to the right and backing up. This maneuver faced her in the direction of Barth, but left the jeep so close to the boardwalk that it was effectively screened by the crowd.

The jeep was inching forward when Dorcus yelled, "Attention, everyone! Stop that jeep!"

Instantly the mob of people on both boardwalks obediently surged out into the ankle-deep mud to hem in the jeep. April had to halt to avoid running some of them down.

Flinging open the curtained door on the driver's side, April pointed to the people on the porch.

"Order revoked!" she called out in a clear voice. "Grab those people and tie them up!"

With instant obedience the crowd began to surge toward the boarding house.

Dorcus yelled, "No! That order is revoked!" She pointed at the jeep. "Haul those people out of there and bring them here!"

The mob paused, still obedient, but now confused by all the orders and counter-orders:

April shouted, "Everybody sing! Come on now! Ta-ra-ra-ra-boom-de-ay!"

The entire crowd picked up her lead to sing the stirring song. The roaring chorus drowned out all possibility of any further orders being heard.

The bulk of the mob was now between the jeep and the THRUSH

agents, and the way ahead was clear. April shifted back into low-low and resumed her snails' pace forward.

She glanced toward the boarding house, and her heart began to pound when she saw the new strategy Dorcus had ordered. The six THRUSH men had formed themselves into a flying wedge, with Dorcus in the middle, and were plowing through the mob toward the jeep.

April had the vagrant thought that Dorcus was going to ruin her shoes, because April was wearing her boots. Then the flying wedge was nearly at the still slowly-moving jeep.

Shifting into neutral, April grabbed her purse from the seat beside her. Whipping out a perfume atomizer and a handkerchief, she flung open the curtained door.

The flying wedge broke through the last of the crowd into the clear. From a distance of four feet Anton Radak, in the lead, aimed a pistol at April's head.

April clapped the specially treated handkerchief over her nose and mouth, aimed the atomizer and released a spray of tear gas.

All six men, plus Dorcus, reeled backward, gasping. Swinging her feet out of the jeep, April advanced on them, still holding the protective handkerchief to her face and spraying steadily.

Guns dropped into the mud and the THRUSH people fell to their knees, blinded and coughing.

Unfortunately some of the nearby singers were hit by the tear gas too. They didn't get it as badly, though. Several abruptly stopped singing and reeled away toward the boardwalk, gasping for breath, but none fell to his knees.

April dropped the atomizer back into her purse, but kept the handkerchief pressed to her face. Taking out a lipstick, she touched a hidden catch and a hypodermic needle shot up from one end.

As the blinded and coughing THRUSH agents floundered helplessly in the mud, she gave each a healthy injection of chloral hydrate.

Climbing back into the jeep, April started off in low-low again. When the jeep had gained sufficient traction, she shifted into low, then into second.

She left it there, fearing it would stall in the deep mire if she attempted to shift into high. The vehicle was moving at a respectable ten miles an hour by the time it reached the village limits.

The thunderous chorus in the street behind them was still deafening even at the distance of a city block, but they were now far enough from it for April to realize that Mark Slate and Ma Rooney were singing at the tops of their voices too.

"Shut up!" April yelled.

There was instant silence from the back seat.

When they reached the cemetery, April pulled onto the graveled drive. Ordering Slate and Ma Rooney out of the jeep, she led them over to the helicopter and had them climb inside. She got in herself, switched on the cabin lights, took off her muddy boots and told the others to do the same.

Taking her transistor radio-communicator from her purse, April elevated the antenna and called U.N.C.L.E. headquarters. Night duty commander Conrad answered.

"I don't suppose Mr. Waverly is around at this time of night, is he?" April asked.

"He's home in bed," Conrad said. "Do you want me to relay to him?"

"Please," April said.

A moment later Alexander Waverly's calm voice said, "Yes, Miss Dancer?"

"I'm sitting in a helicopter in a cemetery just outside of Pig Wallow, sir," April said. "Mark Slate and his landlady, Mrs. Rooney, are both with me. Both have been drugged by Z-17. I'm going to fly them to Barth for medical attention."

"How did they become drugged?" Waverly asked.

"It's a long story, sir. It had better wait for my full report. The bakery plant at Pig Wallow has burned down. Or, more accurately, is burning down, because the fire still going. Boris Rank, Anton Radak, Dorcus Elias and four other THRUSH agents are lying in the mud in the street in Pig Wallow, unconscious from chloral hydrate."

"Indeed," Waverly said with mild surprise.

"When I get to Barth, I will inform the sheriff's department so that they can be picked up. I will also ask them to rush a loud-speaker system to Pig Wallow."

"A loud-speaker system, Miss Dancer? Whatever for?"

"The villagers are all standing in the street singing *ta-ra-ra-ra-boom-de-ay* at the tops of their voices, sir," April said. "They will continue singing until they drop from exhaustion unless ordered to stop, and the only way an order could be heard is over a loud-speaker."

After a moment of silence, Waverly said, "Your report gets curiouser and curiouser, as Alice in Wonderland said, Miss Dancer. As a matter of fact, your reports frequently remind me of Alice in Wonderland. I suppose that when you make your full report, you will have a reasonable explanation for all the chaos you seem to have created in Pig Wallow."

"Yes, sir."

I think I will "wait for your full report. My understanding of what

you have been up to has already passed the point of credence."

"April said."I hope to back in New York some time tomorrow."

Dancer pushed down the antenna, replaced the communicator in her purse and took out her compact. Opening it, she stared into the mirror. An expression of horror grew on her face.

She made immediate repairs before starting the helicopter engine.

One week later April, Slate, Randy Kovac and Waverly were seated in Mr. Waverly's office. Mr. Waverly was summarizing a long written report he had just received from the investigative team he had sent to Pig Wallow.

"The baking plant was totally destroyed by fire," Waverly said. "Nothing remained but a heap of ashes. There have been no further deaths and all residents of Pig Wallow, including Mrs. Rooney, have now fully recovered from the effects of the drug."

"What's the status of the THRUSH people?" Mark Slate asked.

Waverly skimmed through the pages of the report until he found the proper section. "Boris Rank and Dorcus Elias are being held in the county jail on charges of murder–the fourteen deaths resulting from Z-seventeen, of course. Anton Radak, Kurt Shill, Josef Donner and young Betz are charged with conspiracy to commit murder. The helicopter pilot, Chance Mott, is being charged only as an accessory."

April said, "Even if they don't end up in the gas chamber, they all should be out of circulation for a long time."

Randy Kovac said, "What I don't understand is why Miss Dancer is immune to the drug. Nobody else seems to be."

"Funeral director Myron Stoyle was," Slate reminded him. "And he had been ingesting Z-seventeen daily for a month."

"Oh, yeah," Randy said. "The guy with the migraine headaches."

A knock came at the door and Waverly told the knocker to come in. Sam Clifford of U.N.C.L.E.'s research lab stepped quickly into the room.

"We've hit on an antidote for Z-seventeen, sir," he said to Waverly. "If THRUSH ever tries to distribute the drug again, we can broadcast a general warning and tell people to lay in a supply of the antidote from their nearest drugstore."

Waverly hiked his eyebrows. "Is the antidote that easily available?"

Sam Clifford grinned. "It's one of the most easily available drugs on the market, sir. It's nothing but common aspirin."